ACME March No. 2 75¢

BIZARRE FANTASY TALES

THE HOLINESS OF AZEDARAC
A Tale of Averoigne
by CLARK ASHTON SMITH

THE WOMAN IN GRAY
by WALKER G. EVERETT

THE ASHLEY PREMIERE
by EDDY C. BERTIN

MY FAVORITE MURDER
by AMBROSE BIERCE

THE NEMESIS OF FIRE

A Classic Novella by ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

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Volume 1 *CONTENTS FOR MARCH* *Number 2*

THE EDITOR'S PAGE (on Clark Ashton Smith) 4
THE NEMESIS OF FIRE (novella) ..... *Algernon Blackwood* 10
COMING NEXT ISSUE 71
INQUISITIONS (Book Reviews) ..... *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 72
MY FAVORITE MURDER ..... *Ambrose Bierce* 76
THE HOLINESS OF AZEDERAC ..... *Clark Ashton Smith* 84
THE ASHLEY PREMIERE ..... *Eddy C. Bertin* 103
CACILLIA ..... *Reinsmith* 109
THE WOMAN IN GRAY ..... *Walker G. Everett* 115
THE PENTACLE (Your Letters & Our Comments) 121
READERS' PREFERENCE PAGE (double-barrelled) 129/130

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

Editorial Consultants: Robert A. Madle, Sam Moskowitz

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The Editor's Page

In 1930, the young person attracted to fantasy and science fiction against the disapproval or somewhat wavering tolerance of his elders had a rather difficult time of it on that score alone, aside from the fact that quarters and fifty-cent pieces (most of the monthly magazines sold for twenty-five cents, the really big quarterlies for fifty cents) were not easy to come by.

I had managed to obtain two successive issues of *AMAZING STORIES* toward the end of 1928 (the November and December issues) through petty vandalism and subterfuge: the Stamford Public Library had copies of *THE OPEN ROAD FOR BOYS,* and some of the 1928 issues carried ads for *AMAZING STORIES,* showing a reproduction of the cover for the July 1928 issue—a very fine and amazing one indeed—and including a coupon whereby one could obtain a free sample copy. I gently tore one out, filled it in, and sent it off, receiving thereby the first issue I owned, November 1928, which had a wonderful cover, part one of a two part serial, and my introduction to the writings of David H. Keller, M.D.: *The Psychophonic Nurse.* So how was I going to obtain the next issue and finish *The World at Bay?* Simple: back to the library to repeat my earlier crime, and give the coupon to the kid across the street; I'd let him read my copy of the November issue, and he'd let me read his copy of the December issue, so that we'd both get to read that exciting serial, complete.

Fortunately, the timing was right; the possibility that we both might receive the same issue had never occurred to me. So that took care of two issues. Then in December, I saw the January 1929 issue, with a splendid cover illustrating a new serial, *The Sixth Glacier.* Somehow I found twenty-five cents, and bought it; but that was the last straw so far as the authorities at home were concerned: no more of this lurid literature. It would be ten years before I managed to obtain a copy of the February 1929 issue and finish that serial, to find that part two was something of a let-down.

So for the rest of 1929 it was a case of looking longingly at the covers as I went by the newsstands, and occasionally managing to find copies within reach that I could pore over.

However, my father being an electrician and radio experimenter (he built the first radio we owned), there were copies of *RADIO NEWS* around the house in Darien, whence we'd moved, and these carried ads for Mr. Gernsback's two new science fiction magazines, *SCIENCE WONDER STORIES* and *AIR WONDER STORIES.* These, alas, did not offer free sample

copies, but they did offer 8-issue subscriptions for $1.00, which came to a full half-price deal. So I managed to wrangle permission to subscribe to *SCIENCE WONDER STORIES* as a Christmas present for 1929, and full of enthusiasm, went out and bought a copy of the January 1930 *AIR WONDER STORIES*. And somewhere, I found another coupon to clip, whereby I received a free sample of the February 1930 *AMAZING STORIES* (this time, a disappointment, as I'd wanted the January issue, with Wesso's splendid cover illustrating, *When the Atoms Failed*, by a new author named John W. Campbell, Jr.). Then came the problem of raising funds to obtain subsequent issues of *AIR WONDER STORIES* and back issues of both Gernsback titles, through such wickedness as banking only a penny of the fifty cents I was supposed to save on school Bank Days, and other crimes which the Fifth Amendment protects me from having to disclose.

Mr. Gernsback betrayed me (and, I wonder, how many others in a situation similar to mine—whose permission to read science fiction came from the fact that the magic word *science* was in the title of the magazine), first with the April issue of *SCIENCE WONDER STORIES*, whereon the word "science" was printed in yellow on white, so that one could barely see it, and then by dropping it altogether from the title with the June 1930 issue, when *SCIENCE WONDER STORIES* and *AIR WONDER STORIES* were combined to form *WONDER STORIES*. My subscription ran out with the August 1930 issue, (by which time I'd managed to subscribe to *AMAZING STORIES*—expensive: you only got six issues for $1.00 there), and that issue concluded a serial. At this point I first tried to kick not the entire habit, but to taper down. *WONDER STORIES* had a much more lurid appearance than *AMAZING STORIES*, and the stories themselves, on the whole didn't seem nearly as good (far less "scientific," for one thing; and, I might add, re-reading these old issues many years later confirmed the original impression—the Gernsback magazines in this period were inferior to *AMAZING STORIES*).

So with truly tremendous will power I refrained from purchasing the September 1930 issue when it came out, even though I had the twenty-five cents and had not been specifically forbidden to do so, and the cover on the new issue was a fascinating one, very well done, for the most part. (It showed a modest-looking damsel caught in a vast spider web, with a giant spider about to approach her, while our hero plays some sort of ray upon the spider. The cover still has appeal, although the expression of the girl's face is far more bovine than frightened.) So the issue came and went, and the first of September 1930 came, and out came the October issue of *WONDER STORIES* with the most lurid cover I'd seen to date—truly marvellous, showing one of three intrepid space explorers (sans space suits) being caught up and drawn into the mouth of a carniverous flower.

This was a scene from *Marooned in Andromeda*, by a new author to science fiction: Clark Ashton Smith. And now we get to what the essay is really about, for this story opens the final volume of CAS's collected works, published by Arkham House. The first three stories in this volume, *Other Dimensions* (see the *Inquisitions* section for a complete breakdown of contents) are the first three stories of his that I saw, although not in order. Gernsback was his chief publisher in science fiction magazines (he appeared once in *ASTOUNDING STORIES*—December 1933—and once in *AMAZING STORIES*—September 1934) in the First Period of magazine science

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fiction. This ended in February 1938; the Campbell period opened up with the March 1938 issue of *ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION*, the first magazine to have the words "science fiction" as part of its title.

The second CAS story actually to appear in WS, then, was *An Adventure in Futurity* (April 1931), while *The Amazing Planet* was the cover-illustrated story in the Summer 1931 issue of *WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY*. However, it makes better sense to run this in a collection directly after *Marooned in Andromeda*, since *The Amazing Planet* is a sequel to it.

These three stories, then, were my introduction to Clark Ashton Smith; and when, in August 1931, I saw *The Return of the Sorcerer* on the contents page of the initial issue of *STRANGE TALES*, the name was familiar to me. His name on the contents page of the October 1931 issue of *WEIRD TALES* had something to do with my deciding to try the magazine, although Edmond Hamilton and Otis Adelbert Kline (with *The Shot from Saturn* and part four of *Tam, Son of the Tiger*, respectively) were the real drawing cards. And as it turned out, *The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake*, which is in this new Arkham House volume, was rather slight and disappointing. Not disappointing, however, was *The Planet Entity* in the Fall 1931 *WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY* (which appears as *Seedling of Mars* in the earlier Arkham House collection, *Tales of Science and Sorcery*); at the time, I missed *Immortals of Mercury*, published by Gernsback as part of his science fiction classics, pamphlet series, all new stories. (It also appears in the earlier Smith collection noted above.)

I mention this series of five stories published by Gernsback, an unconnected series except for the two

Roverton-Volmar tales, not only because four of them constituted my introduction to Clark Ashton Smith, but also because of one thing they had in common (and the fifth one also has it, but I did not know that at the time): none of them were very good, in comparison to the wonderful tales by CAS that I would read later on. I do not mean that they were lacking in imagination; they were quite strong on this point. No, what is missing is the particular flavor of Clark Ashton Smith that I encountered later; and when H. P. Lovecraft referred in one of the two letters he wrote to me in 1936/37 to the "dangerous concessions" CAS made in some of his Gernsback stories, I realized what he was referring to.

Fortunately, Gernsback was so taken by the Clark Ashton Smith imagination that he did not reject *The City of Singing Flame*, which is the first CAS story he published that begins to show what Smith could do; on the contrary, he praised it highly and had Frank R. Paul do what turned out to be one of his most colorful and imaginative covers (without being lurid) for the July 1931 issue of *WONDER STORIES*. And when we saw the sequel, *Beyond the Singing Flame*, in the November 1931 issue, we saw Smith in the fullness of his glory. (These two stories were reprinted in the 1st and 3rd issues of *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*, and are the original magazine versions. The two tales were combined under the title of *The City of the Singing Flame* in the first Arkham House collection, *Out of Space and Time* and there may be differences in the text; I don't remember, as I never had both the book and the magazines at the same time.)

The Immeasurable Horror was published in the September 1931 issue of *WEIRD TALES*, and is in this present collection, but I wonder whether it had been written for Gernsback originally,

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and rejected by *WONDER STORIES*. At any event, the tales of Clark Ashton Smith that appeared in the Gernsback magazines after 1931 were all worthy ones, though, alas, the best of them appear in the earlier Arkham House collections.

This final collection is for the specialist, as it shows only a little of Smith's best work, although it does present a broad spectrum, from the earliest to the latest, so that if you read the stories in chronological order, according to the copyright notices, you will be able to trace the author's development, from *The Malay Krise*, first published in the October 1910 issue of *THE OVERLAND MONTHLY* to *Told in the Desert* first published in an anthology edited by August Derleth (*Over the Edge, New Stories of the Macabre*) in 1964. Just where this final published story fits in to the Smith canon, we can't tell; there is no indication of when it was actually written. I would suspect that he did it in the early '30s for Farnsworth Wright's *THE MAGIC CARPET* the final issue of which appeared in 1933, dated 1934, but this is no more than a guess.

The Oriental stories: *The Malay Krise* (1910), *The Ghost of Mohammed Din* (1910), *The Mahout* (1911), *The Raja and the Tiger* (1912), *The Justice of the Elephant* (1931), and *The Kiss of Zoraida* (1933), show little more about CAS except that he was a more skillful writer in 1931 than he was in 1911–*The Justice of the Elephant* is close to a rewrite of *The Mahout*, but much smoother. *Something New*, from *10 Story Book* (1924) could have been written by any of dozens of other scribes who were turning out such fluff, but it is only fair to note that CAS did it rather well, and some of the others were doing it badly.

On a far different level are the three tales that Smith contributed (for very

little, if not as an outright gift) to Charles D. Hornig's amateur publication, *THE FANTASY FAN: A Tale of Sir John Maundeville* (October 1933), *The Ghoul* (January 1934), and *Thirteen Phantasms* (March 1936). The first of the three is a masterpiece, a splendid pastiche of the *Boke of the Voiages and Travailes of Sir John de Mandeville, Kt.*, written in (Middle) French in 1355. (You will find a section of Mandeville himself—translated and edited—*Wonderful Things Beyond Cathay*, in Lin Carter's anthology, *Dragons, Elves and Heroes*, published in Ballantine's Adult Fantasy series, in soft cover.) Since CAS has a brief foreword to the story, I rather regret that the title under which Hornig first published it, *The Kingdom of the Worm*, was not retained.

On the whole, this is not a book with which to introduce Clark Ashton Smith to someone who has never read his stories before; there is too much substandard material (in relation to his finest stories) and too little which shows what his reputation is really based upon. It is a book for collectors and completists and students and scholars; the former, I suppose, might well buy it without bothering to read it; but the latter will find it rewarding if they specialize in fantastic fiction or the pulp era. I do not mean to imply that I did not enjoy reading these stories (with a few exceptions, all of them brief, as indicated above), and the book is an example of Arkham House's fine production work, even if I noticed a few more typographical errors than usual—which means I counted half a dozen or so this time.

The best introduction to Clark Ashton Smith presently available is the Ballantine, softcover edition of the Zothique series, under the appropriate

(Turn to Page 126)

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THE NEMESIS OF FIRE

BY ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD (1869-1951) was rated by H. P. Lovecraft, in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, as a rather uneven writer but very powerful when at his best. This is not so demeaning as it sounds, for although Blackwood was not so prolific as many others in his time–particularly the pulpeteers, some of whom turned out a million words a year–nonetheless there are two very thick volumes of his short stories, and I am by no means certain that these contain all of them. No one writing so great a quantity could hope to maintain a uniform high quality; and, of course, Mr. Lovecraft would never have denied that his own output was uneven as to quality. He does not give the "John Silence" stories high marks, and, of course, in comparison to *The Wendigo* and *The Willows* (both stories far more suited to HPL's taste than even the best of a psychic detective series) they are not the very top Blackwood. But my feeling is that they are not too far below his best, and second division Blackwood is streets ahead of far too many others more widely known.

BY SOME MEANS WHICH I never could fathom, John Silence always contrived to keep the compartment to himself, and as the train had a clear run of two hours before the first stop, there was ample time to go over the preliminary facts of the case. He had telephoned to me that very morning, and even through the disguise of the miles of wire the thrill of incalculable adventure had sounded in his voice.

From *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary*, copyright 1909 by John W. Luce and company; no record of copyright renewal.

"As if it were an ordinary country visit," he called, in reply to my question; "and don't forget to bring your gun."

"With blank catridges, I suppose?" for I knew his rigid principles with regard to the taking of life, and guessed that the guns were merely for some obvious purpose of disguise.

Then he thanked me for coming, mentioned the train, snapped down the receiver, and left me vibrating with the excitement of anticipation to do my packing. For the honour of accompanying Dr. John Silence on one of his big cases was what many would have considered an empty honour—and risky. Certainly the adventure held all manner of possibilities, and I arrived at Waterloo with the feelings of a man who is about to embark on some dangerous and peculiar mission in which the dangers he expects to run will not be the ordinary dangers to life and limb, but of some secret character difficult to name and still more difficult to cope with.

"The Manor House has a high sound," he told me, as we sat with our feet up and talked, "but I believe it is little more than an overgrown farmhouse in the desolate heather country beyond D—, and its owner, Colonel Wragge, a retired soldier with a taste for books, lives there practically alone, I understand, with an elderly invalid sister. So you need not look forward to a lively visit, unless the case provides some excitement of its own."

"Which is likely?"

By way of reply he handed me a letter marked *Private*. It was dated a week ago, and signed "Yours faithfully, Horace Wragge."

"He heard of me, you see, through Captain Anderson," the doctor explained modestly, as though his fame were not almost world-wide; "you remember that Indian obsession case—"

I read the letter. Why it should have been marked private was difficult to understand. It was very brief, direct, and to the point. It referred by way of introduction to Captain Anderson, and then stated quite simply that the writer needed help of a peculiar kind and asked for a personal interview—a morning interview, since it was impossible for him to be absent from the house at night. The letter was dignified even to the point of abruptness, and it is difficult to explain how it managed to convey to me the impression of a strong man, shaken and perplexed. Perhaps the restraint of the wording, and the mystery of the affair had something to do with it; and the reference to the Anderson case, the horror of which lay still vivid in my memory, may have touched the sense of something rather ominous and alarming. But, whatever the cause, there was no doubt that an impression of serious peril rose somehow out of that white paper with

the few lines of firm writing, and the spirit of a deep uneasiness ran between the words and reached the mind without any visible form of expression.

"And when you saw him—?" I asked, returning the letter as the train rushed clattering noisily through Clapham Junction.

"I have not seen him," was the reply. "The man's mind was charged to the brim when he wrote that; full of vivid mental pictures. Notice the restraint of it. For the main character of his case psychometry could be depended upon, and the scrap of paper his hand has touched is sufficient to give to another mind—a sensitive and sympathetic mind—clear mental pictures of what is going on. I think I have a very sound general idea of his problem."

"So there may be excitement after all?"

John Silence waited a moment before he replied. "Something very serious is amiss there," he said gravely, at length. "Some one—not himself, I gather,—has been meddling with a rather dangerous kind of gunpowder. So—yes, there may be excitement, as you put it."

"And my duties?" I asked, with a decidedly growing interest. "Remember, I am your 'assistant.' "

"Behave like an intelligent confidential secretary. Observe everything, without seeming to. Say nothing—nothing that means anything. Be present at all interviews. I may ask a good deal of you, for if my impressions are correct this is—" He broke off suddenly.

"But I won't tell you my impressions yet," he resumed after a moment's thought. "Just watch and listen as the case proceeds. Form your own impressions and cultivate your intuitions. We come as ordinary visitors, of course," he added, a twinkle showing for an instant in his eye; "hence, the guns."

Though disappointed not to hear more, I recognized the wisdom of his words and knew how valueless my impressions would be once the powerful suggestion of having heard his own lay behind them. I likewise reflected that intuition joined to a sense of humour was of more use to a man than double the quantity of mere "brains," as such.

Before putting the letter away, however, he handed it back, telling me to place it against my forehead for a few moments and then describe any pictures that came spontaneously into my mind.

"Don't deliberately look for anything. Just imagine you see the inside of the eyelid, and wait for pictures that rise against its dark screen."

I followed his instructions, making my mind as nearly a blank as possible. But no visions came. I saw nothing but the lines of light that pass

to and fro like the changes of a kaleidoscope across the blackness. A momentary sensation of warmth came and went curiously.

"You see—what?" he asked presently.

"Nothing," I was obliged to admit disappointedly; "nothing but the usual flashes of light one always sees. Only, perhaps, they are more vivid than usual."

He said nothing by way of comment or reply.

"And they group themselves now and then," I continued, with painful candour, for I longed to see the pictures he had spoken of, "group themselves into globes and round balls of fire, and the lines that flash about sometimes look like triangles and crosses—almost like geometrical figures. Nothing more."

I opened my eyes again, and gave him back the letter.

"It makes my head hot," I said, feeling somehow unworthy for not seeing anything of interest. But the look in his eyes arrested my attention at once.

"That sensation of heat is important," he said significantly.

"It was certainly real, and rather uncomfortable," I replied, hoping he would expand and explain. "There was a distinct feeling of warmth—internal warmth somewhere—oppressive in a sense."

"That is interesting," he remarked, putting the letter back in his pocket, and settling himself in the corner with newspapers and books. He vouchsafed nothing more, and I knew the uselessness of trying to make him talk. Following his example I settled likewise with magazines into my corner. But when I closed my eyes again to look for the flashing lights and the sensation of heat, I found nothing but the usual phantasmagoria of the day's events—faces, scenes, memories,—and in due course I fell asleep and then saw nothing at all of any kind.

When we left the train, after six hours' travelling, at a little wayside station standing without trees in a world of sand and heather, the late October shadows had already dropped their sombre veil upon the landscape, and the sun dipped almost out of sight behind the moorland hills. In a high dogcart, behind a fast horse, we were soon rattling across the undulating stretches of an open and bleak country, the keen air stinging our cheeks and the scents of pine and bracken strong about us. Bare hills were faintly visible against the horizon, and the coachman pointed to a bank of distant shadows on our left where he told us the sea lay. Occasional stone farm houses, standing back from the road among straggling fir trees, and large black barns that seemed to shift past us with a

movement of their own in the gloom, were the only signs of humanity and civilisation that we saw, until at the end of a bracing five miles the lights of the lodge gates flared before us and we plunged into a thick grove of pine trees that concealed the Manor House up to the moment of actual arrival.

Colonel Wragge himself met us in the hall. He was the typical army officer who had seen service, real service, and found himself in the process. He was tall and well built, broad in the shoulders, but lean as a greyhound, with grave eyes, rather stern, and a moustache turning grey. I judged him to be about sixty years of age, but his movements showed a suppleness of strength and agility that contradicted the years. The face was full of character and resolution, the face of a man to be depended upon, and the straight grey eyes, it seemed to me, wore a veil of perplexed anxiety that he made no attempt to disguise. The whole appearance of the man at once clothed the adventure with gravity and importance. A matter that gave such a man cause for serious alarm, I felt, must be something real and of genuine moment.

His speech and manner, as he welcomed us, were like his letter, simple and sincere. He had a nature as direct and undeviating as a bullet. Thus, he showed plainly his surprise that Dr. Silence had not come alone.

"My confidential secretary, Mr. Hubbard," the doctor said, introducing me, and the steady gaze and powerful shake of the hand I then received were well calculated, I remember thinking, to drive home the impression that here was a man who was not to be trifled with, and whose perplexity must spring from some very real and tangible cause. And, quite obviously, he was relieved that we had come. His welcome was unmistakably genuine.

He led us at once into a room, half library, half smoking-room, that opened out of the low-ceilinged hall. The Manor House gave the impression of a rambling and glorified farmhouse, solid, ancient, comfortable, and wholly unpretentious. And so it was. Only the heat of the place struck me as unnatural. This room with the blazing fire may have seemed uncomfortably warm after the long drive through the night air; yet it seemed to me that the hall itself, and the whole atmosphere of the house, breathed a warmth that hardly belonged to well-filled grates or the pipes of hot air and water. It was not the heat of the greenhouse; it was an oppressive heat that somehow got into the head and mind. It stirred a curious sense of uneasiness in me, and I caught myself thinking of the sensation of warmth that had emanated from the letter in the train.

I heard him thanking Dr. Silence for having come; there was no preamble, and the exchange of civilities was of the briefest description.

Evidently here was a man who, like my companion, loved action rather than talk. His manner was straightforward and direct. I saw him in a flash: puzzled, worried, harassed into a state of alarm by something he could not comprehend; forced to deal with things he would have preferred to despise, yet facing it all with dogged seriousness and making no attempt to conceal that he felt secretly ashamed of his incompetence.

"So I cannot offer you much entertainment beyond that of my own company, and the queer business that has been going on here, and is still going on," he said, with a slight inclination of the head toward me by way of including me in his confidence.

"I think, Colonel Wragge," replied John Silence impressively, "that we shall none of us find the time hang heavy. I gather we shall have our hands full."

The two men looked at one another for the space of some seconds, and there was an indefinable quality in their silence which for the first time made me admit a swift question into my mind; and I wondered a little at my rashness in coming with so little reflection into a big case of this incalculable doctor. But no answer suggested itself, and to withdraw was of course, inconceivable. The gates had closed behind me now, and the spirit of the adventure was already besieging my mind with its advance guard of a thousand little hopes and fears.

Explaining that he would wait till after dinner to discuss anything serious, as no reference was ever made before his sister, he led the way upstairs and showed us personally to our rooms; and it was just as I was finishing dressing that a knock came at my door and Dr. Silence entered.

He was always what is called a serious man, so that even in moments of comedy you felt he never lost sight of the profound gravity of life, but as he came across the room to me I caught the expression of his face and understood in a flash that he was now in his most grave and earnest mood. He looked almost troubled. I stopped fumbling with my black tie and stared.

"It *is* serious," he said, speaking in a low voice, "more so even than I imagined. Colonel Wragge's control over his thoughts concealed a great deal in my psychometrising of the letter. I looked in to warn you to keep yourself well in hand—generally speaking."

"Haunted house?" I asked, conscious of a distinct shiver down my back.

But he smiled gravely at the question. "Haunted House of Life more likely," he replied, and a look came into his eyes which I had only seen there when a human soul was in the toils and he was thick in the fight of rescue. He was stirred in the deeps.

"Colonel Wragge—or the sister?" I asked hurriedly, for the gong was sounding.

"Neither directly," he said from the door. "Something far older, something very, very remote indeed. This thing has to do with the ages, unless I am mistaken greatly, the ages on which the mists of memory have long lain undisturbed."

He came across the floor very quickly with a finger on his lips, looking at me with a peculiar searchingness of gaze.

"Are you aware yet of anything—odd here?" he asked in a whisper. "Anything you cannot quite define, for instance. Tell me, Hubbard, for I want to know all your impressions. They may help me."

I shook my head, avoiding his gaze, for there was something in the eyes that scared me a little. But he was so in earnest that I set my mind keenly searching.

"Nothing yet," I replied truthfully, wishing I could confess to a real emotion; "nothing but the strange heat of the place."

He gave a little jump forward in my direction. "The heat again, that's it!" he exclaimed, as though glad of my corroboration. "And how would you describe it, perhaps?" he asked quickly, with a hand on the door knob.

"It doesn't seem like ordinary physical heat," I said, casting about in my thoughts for a definition.

"More of a mental heat," he interrupted, "a glowing of thought and desire, a sort of feverish warmth of the spirit. Isn't that it?"

I admitted that he had exactly described my sensations.

"Good!" he said, as he opened the door, and with an indescribable gesture that combined a warning to be ready with a sign of praise for my correct intuition, he was gone.

I hurried after him, and found the two men waiting for me in front of the fire.

"I ought to warn you," our host was saying as I came in, "that my sister, whom you will meet at dinner, is not aware of the real object of your visit. She is under the impression that we are interested in the same line of study—folklore—and that your researches have led to my seeking acquaintance. She comes to dinner in her chair, you know. It will be a great pleasure to her to meet you both. We have few visitors."

So that on entering the dining-room we were prepared to find Miss Wragge already at her place, seated in a sort of bath-chair. She was a vivacious and charming old lady, with smiling expression and bright eyes, and she chatted all through dinner with unfailing spontaneity. She had

that face, unlined and fresh, that some people carry through life from the cradle to the grave; her smooth plump cheeks were all pink and white, and her hair, still dark, was divided into two glossy and sleek halves on either side of a careful parting. She wore gold-rimmed glasses, and at her throat was a large scarab of green jasper that made a very handsome brooch.

Her brother and Dr. Silence talked little, so that most of the conversation was carried on between herself and me, and she told me a great deal about the history of the old house, most of which I fear I listened to with but half an ear.

"And when Cromwell stayed here," she babbled on, "he occupied the very rooms upstairs that used to be mine. But my brother thinks it safer for me to sleep on the ground floor now in case of fire."

And this sentence has stayed in my memory only because of the sudden way her brother interrupted her and instantly led the conversation on to another topic. The passing reference to fire seemed to have disturbed him, and thenceforward he directed the talk himself.

It was difficult to believe that this lively and animated old lady, sitting beside me and taking so eager an interest in the affairs of life, was practically, we understood, without the use of her lower limbs, and that her whole existence for years had been passed between the sofa, the bed, and the bath-chair in which she chatted so naturally at the dinner-table. She made no allusion to her affliction until the dessert was reached, and then, touching a bell, she made us a witty little speech about leaving us "like time, on noiseless feet," and was wheeled out of the room by the butler and carried off to her apartments at the other end of the house.

And the rest of us were not long in following suit, for Dr. Silence and myself were quite as eager to learn the nature of our errand as our host was to impart it to us. He led us down a long flagged passage to a room at the very end of the house, a room provided with double doors, and windows, I saw, heavily shuttered. Books lined the walls on every side, and a large desk in the bow window was piled up with volumes, some open, some shut, some showing scraps of paper stuck between the leaves, and all smothered in a general cataract of untidy foolscap and loose half-sheets.

"My study and workroom," explained Colonel Wragge, with a delightful touch of innocent pride, as though he were a very serious scholar. He placed armchairs for us round the fire. "Here," he added significantly, "we shall be safe from interruption and can talk securely."

During dinner the manner of the doctor had been all that was natural and spontaneous, though it was impossible for me, knowing him as I did,

not to be aware that he was subconsciously very keenly alert and already receiving upon the ultra-sensitive surface of his mind various and vivid impressions; and there was now something in the gravity of his face, as well as in the significant tone of Colonel Wragge's speech, and something, too, in the fact that we three were shut away in this private chamber about to listen to things probably strange, and certainly mysterious—something in all this that touched my imagination sharply and sent an undeniable thrill along my nerves. Taking the chair indicated by my host, I lit my cigar and waited for the opening of the attack, fully conscious that we were now too far gone in the adventure to admit of withdrawal, and wondering a little anxiously where it was going to lead.

What I expected precisely, it is hard to say. Nothing definite, perhaps. Only the sudden change was dramatic. A few hours before the prosaic atmosphere of Piccadilly was about me, and now I was sitting in a secret chamber of this remote old building waiting to hear an account of things that held possibly the genuine heart of terror. I thought of the dreary moors and hills outside, and the dark pine copses soughing in the wind of night; I remembered my companion's singular words up in my bedroom before dinner; and then I turned and noted carefully the stern countenance of the Colonel as he faced us and lit his big black cigar before speaking.

The threshold of an adventure, I reflected as I waited for the first words, is always the most thrilling moment—until the climax comes.

But Colonel Wragge hesitated—mentally—a long time before he began. He talked briefly of our journey, the weather, the country, and other comparatively trivial topics, while he sought about in his mind for an appropriate entry into the subject that was uppermost in the thoughts of all of us. The fact was he found it a difficult matter to speak of at all, and it was Dr. Silence who finally showed him the way over the hedge.

"Mr. Hubbard will take a few notes when you are ready—you won't object," he suggested; "I can give my undivided attention in this way."

"By all means," turning to reach some of the loose sheets on the writing table, and glancing at me. He still hesitated a little, I thought. "The fact is," he said apologetically, "I wondered if it was quite fair to trouble you so soon. The daylight might suit you better to hear what I have to tell. Your sleep, I mean, might be less disturbed, perhaps."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness," John Silence replied with his gentle smile, taking command as it were from that moment, "but really we are both quite immune. There is nothing, I think, that could prevent either of

us sleeping, except—an outbreak of fire, or some such very physical disturbance."

Colonel Wragge raised his eyes and looked fixedly at him. This reference to an outbreak of fire I felt sure was made with a purpose. It certainly had the desired effect of removing from our host's manner the last signs of hesitancy.

"Forgive me," he said. "Of course, I know nothing of your methods in matters of this kind—so, perhaps, you would like me to begin at once and give you an outline of the situation?"

Dr. Silence bowed his agreement. "I can then take my precautions accordingly," he added calmly.

The soldier looked up for a moment as though he did not quite gather the meaning of these words; but he made no further comment and turned at once to tackle a subject on which he evidently talked with diffidence and unwillingness.

"It's all so utterly out of my line of things," he began, puffing out clouds of cigar smoke between his words, "and there's so little to tell with any real evidence behind it, that it's almost impossible to make a consecutive story for you. It's the total cumulative effect that is so—so disquieting." He chose his words with care, as though determined not to travel one hair's breadth beyond the truth.

"I came into this place twenty years ago when my elder brother died," he continued, "but could not afford to live here then. My sister, whom you met at dinner, kept house for him till the end, and during all these years, while I was seeing service abroad, she had an eye to the place—for we never got a satisfactory tenant—and saw that it was not allowed to go to ruin. I myself took possession, however, only a year ago.

"My brother," he went on, after a perceptible pause, "spent much of his time away, too. He was a great traveller, and filled the house with stuff he brought home from all over the world. The laundry—a small detached building beyond the servants' quarters—he turned into a regular little museum. The curios and things I have cleared away—they collected dust and were always getting broken—but the laundry-house you shall see tomorrow."

Colonel Wragge spoke with such deliberation and with so many pauses that this beginning took him a long time. But at this point he came to a full stop altogether. Evidently there was something he wished to say that cost him considerable effort. At length he looked up steadily into my companion's face.

"May I ask you that is, if you won't think it strange," he said, and a

sort of hush came over his voice and manner, "whether you have noticed anything at all unusual—anything queer, since you came into the house?"

Dr. Silence answered without a moment's hesitation.

"I have," he said. "There is a curious sensation of heat in the place."

"Ah!" exclaimed the other, with a slight start. "You *have* noticed it. This unaccountable heat—"

"But its cause, I gather, is not in the house itself—but outside," I was astonished to hear the doctor add.

Colonel Wragge rose from his chair and turned to unhook a framed map that hung upon the wall. I got the impression that the movement was made with the deliberate purpose of concealing his face.

"Your diagnosis, I believe, is amazingly accurate," he said after a moment, turning round with the map in his hands. "Though, of course, I can have no idea how you should guess—"

John Silence shrugged expressively. "Merely my impression," he said. "If you pay attention to impressions, and do not allow them to be confused by deductions of the intellect, you will often find them surprisingly, uncannily, accurate."

Colonel Wragge resumed his seat and laid the map upon his knees. His face was very thoughtful as he plunged abruptly again into his story.

"On coming into possession," he said, looking us alternately in the face, "I found a crop of stories of the most extraordinary and impossible kind I had ever heard—stories which at first I treated with amused indifference, but later was forced to regard seriously, if only to keep my servants. These stories I thought I traced to the fact of my brother's death—and, in a way, I think so still."

He leant forward and handed the map to Dr. Silence. "It's an old plan of the estate," he explained, "but accurate enough for our purpose, and I wish you would note the position of the plantations marked upon it, especially those near the house. That one," indicating the spot with his finger, "is called the Twelve Acre Plantation. It was just there, on the side nearest the house, that my brother and the head keeper met their deaths."

He spoke as a man forced to recognise facts that he deplored, and would have preferred to leave untouched—things he personally would rather have treated with ridicule if possible. It made his words peculiarly dignified and impressive, and I listened with an increasing uneasiness as to the sort of help the doctor would look to me for later. It seemed as though I were a spectator of some drama of mystery in which any moment I might be summoned to play a part.

"It was twenty years ago," continued the Colonel, "but there was much

talk about it at the time, unfortunately, and you may, perhaps, have heard of the affair. Stride, the keeper, was a passionate, hot-tempered man, but I regret to say, so was my brother, and quarrels between them seem to have been frequent."

"I do not recall the affair," said the doctor. "May I ask what was the cause of death?" Something in his voice made me prick up my ears for the reply.

"The keeper, it was said, from suffocation. And at the inquest the doctors averred that both men had been dead the same length of time when found."

"And your brother?" asked John Silence, noticing the omission, and listening intently.

"Equally mysterious," said our host, speaking in a low voice with effort. "But there was one distressing feature I think I ought to mention. For those who saw the face -I did not see it myself–and though Stride carried a gun its chambers were undischarged –" He stammered and hesitated with confusion. Again that sense of terror moved between his words. He stuck.

"Yes," said the chief listener sympathetically.

"My brother's face, they said, looked as though it had been scorched. It had been swept, as it were, by something that burned–blasted. It was, I am told, quite dreadful. The bodies were found lying side by side, faces downwards, both pointing away from the wood, as though they had been in the act of running, and not more than a dozen yards from its edge."

Dr. Silence made no comment. He appeared to be studying the map attentively.

"I did not see the face myself," repeated the other, his manner somehow expressing the sense of awe he contrived to keep out of his voice, "but my sister unfortunately did, and her present state I believe to be entirely due to the shock it gave to her nerves. She never can be brought to refer to it, naturally, and I am even inclined to think that the memory has mercifully been permitted to vanish from her mind. But she spoke of it at the time as a face swept by flame–blasted."

John Silence looked up from his contemplation of the map, but with the air of one who wished to listen, not to speak, and presently Colonel Wragge went on with his account. He stood on the mat, his broad shoulders hiding most of the mantelpiece.

"They all centred about this particular plantation, these stories. That was to be expected, for the people here are as superstitious as Irish

peasantry, and though I made one or two examples among them to stop the foolish talk, it had no effect, and new versions came to my ears every week. You may imagine how little good dismissals did, when I tell you that the servants dismissed themselves. It was not the house servants, but the men who worked on the estate outside. The keepers gave notice one after another, none of them with any reason I could accept; the foresters refused to enter the wood, and the beaters to beat in it. Word flew all over the countryside that Twelve Acre Plantation was a place to be avoided, day or night.

"There came a point," the Colonel went on, now well in his swing, "when I felt compelled to make investigations on my own account. I could not kill the thing by ignoring it; so I collected and analysed the stories at first hand. For this Twelve Acre Wood, you will see by the map, comes rather near home. Its lower end, if you will look, almost touches the end of the back lawn, as I will show you tomorrow, and its dense growth of pines forms the chief protection the house enjoys from the east winds that blow up from the sea. And in olden days, before my brother interfered with it and frightened all the game away, it was one of the best pheasant coverts on the whole estate."

"And what form, if I may ask, did this interference take?" asked Dr. Silence.

"In detail, I cannot tell you, for I do not know—except that I understand it was the subject of his frequent differences with the head keeper; but during the last two years of his life, when he gave up travelling and settled down here, he took a special interest in this wood, and for some unaccountable reason began to build a low stone wall round it. This wall was never finished, but you shall see the ruins tomorrow in the daylight."

"And the result of your investigations—these stories, I mean?" the doctor broke in, anxious to keep him to the main issues.

"Yes, I'm coming to that," he said slowly, "but the wood first, for this wood out of which they grew like mushrooms has nothing in any way peculiar about it. It is very thickly grown, and rises to a clearer part in the centre, a sort of mound where there is a circle of large boulders—old Druid stones, I'm told. At another place there's a small pond. There's nothing distinctive about it that I could mention—just an ordinary pine-wood, a very ordinary pine-wood only the trees are a bit twisted in the trunks, some of 'em, and very dense. Nothing more.

"And the stories? Well, none of them had anything to do with my poor brother, or the keeper, as you might have expected; and they were all

odd—such odd things, I mean, to invent or imagine. I never could make out how these people got such notions into their heads."

He paused a moment to relight his cigar.

"There's no regular path through it," he resumed, puffing vigorously, "but the fields round it are constantly used, and one of the gardeners whose cottage lies over that way declared he often saw moving lights in it at night, and luminous shapes like globes of fire over the tops of the trees, skimming and floating, and making a soft hissing sound—most of 'em said that, in fact—and another man saw shapes flitting in and out among the trees, things that were neither men nor animals, and all faintly luminous. No one ever pretended to see human forms—always queer, huge things they could not properly describe. Sometimes the whole wood was lit up, and one fellow—he's still here and you shall see him—has a most circumstantial yarn about having seen great stars lying on the ground round the edge of the wood at regular intervals—"

"What kind of stars?" put in John Silence sharply, in a sudden way that made me start.

"Oh, I don't know quite; ordinary stars, I think he said, only very large, and apparently blazing as though the ground was alight. He was too terrified to go close and examine, and he has never seen them since."

He stopped and stirred the fire into a welcome blaze—welcome for its blaze of light rather than for its heat. In the room there was already a strange pervading sensation of warmth that was oppressive in its effect and far from comforting.

"Of course," he went on, straightening up again on the mat, "this was all commonplace enough—this seeing lights and figures at night. Most of these fellows drink, and imagination and terror between them may account for almost anything. But others saw things in broad daylight. One of the woodmen, a sober, respectable man, took the shortcut home to his midday meal, and swore he was followed the whole length of the wood by something that never showed itself, but dodged from tree to tree, always keeping out of sight, yet solid enough to make the branches sway and the twigs snap on the ground. And it made a noise, he declared—but really"—the speaker stopped and gave a short laugh—"it's too absurd—"

"*Please!*" insisted the doctor; "for it is these small details that give me the best clues always."

"—it made a crackling noise, he said, like a bonfire. Those were his very words: like the crackling of a bonfire," finished the soldier, with a repetition of his short laugh.

"Most interesting," Dr. Silence observed gravely. "Please omit nothing."

"Yes," he went on, "and it was soon after that the fires began—the fires in the wood. They started mysteriously burning in the patches of coarse white grass that cover the more open parts of the plantation. No one ever actually saw them start, but many, myself among the number, have seen them burning and smouldering. They are always small and circular in shape, and for all the world like a picnic fire. The head keeper has a dozen explanations, from sparks flying out of the house chimneys to the sunlight focusing through a dewdrop, but none of them, I must admit, convince me as being in the least likely or probable. They are most singular, I consider, most singular, these mysterious fires, and I am glad to say that they come only at rather long intervals and never seem to spread.

"But the keeper had other queer stories as well, and about things that are verifiable. He declared that no life ever willingly entered the plantation; more, that no life existed in it at all. No birds nested in the trees, or flew into their shade. He set countless traps, but never caught so much as a rabbit or a weasel. Animals avoided it, and more than once he had picked up dead creatures round the edges that bore no obvious signs of how they had met their death.

"Moreover, he told me one extraordinary tale about his retriever chasing some invisible creature across the field one day when he was out with his gun. The dog suddenly pointed at something in the field at his feet, and then gave chase, yelping like a mad thing. It followed its imaginary quarry to the borders of the wood, and then went in—a thing he had never known it to do before. The moment it crossed the edge—it is darkish in there even in daylight—it began fighting in the most frenzied and terrific fashion. It made him afraid to interfere, he said. And at last, when the dog came out, hanging its tail down and panting, he found something like white hair stuck to its jaws, and brought it to show me. I tell you these details because—"

"They are important, believe me," the doctor stopped him. "And you have it still, this hair?" he asked.

"It disappeared in the oddest way," the Colonel explained. "It was curious looking stuff, something like asbestos, and I sent it to be analysed by the local chemist. But either the man got wind of its origin, or else he didn't like the look of it for some reason, because he returned it to me and said it was neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral, so far as he could make out, and he didn't wish to have anything to do with it. I put it away in paper, but a week later, on opening the package—it was gone! Oh, the

stories are simply endless. I could tell you hundreds all on the same lines."

"And personal experiences of your own, Colonel Wragge?" asked John Silence earnestly, his manner showing the greatest possible interest and sympathy.

The soldier gave an almost imperceptible start. He looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Nothing, I think," he said slowly, "nothing—er—I should like to rely on. I mean nothing I have the right to speak of, perhaps—yet."

His mouth closed with a snap. Dr. Silence, after waiting a little to see if he would add to his reply, did not seek to press him on the point.

"Well," he resumed presently, and as though he would speak contemptuously, yet dared not, "this sort of thing has gone on at intervals ever since. It spreads like wildfire, of course, mysterious chatter of this kind, and people began trespassing all over the estate, coming to see the wood, and making themselves a general nuisance. Notices of man-traps and spring-guns only seemed to increase their persistence; and—think of it," he snorted, "some local Research Society actually wrote and asked permission for one of their members to spend a night in the wood! Bolder fools, who didn't write for leave, came and took away bits of bark from the trees and gave them to clairvoyants, who invented in their turn a further batch of tales. There was simply no end to it all."

"Most distressing and annoying, I can well believe." interposed the doctor.

"Then suddenly the phenomena ceased as mysteriously as they had begun, and the interest flagged. The tales stopped. People got interested in something else. It all seemed to die out. This was last July. I can tell you exactly, for I've kept a diary more or less of what happened."

"Ah!"

"But now, quite recently, within the past three weeks, it has all revived again with a rush—with a kind of furious attack, so to speak. It has really become unbearable. You may imagine what it means, and the general state of affairs, when I say that the possibility of leaving has occurred to me."

"Incendiarism?" suggested Dr. Silence, half under his breath, but not so low that Colonel Wragge did not hear him.

"By Jove, sir, you take the very words out of my mouth!" exclaimed the astonished man, glancing from the doctor to me and from me to the doctor, and rattling the money in his pocket as though some explanation of my friend's divining powers were to be found that way.

"It's only that you are thinking very vividly," the doctor said quietly, "and your thoughts form pictures in my mind before you utter them. It's merely a little elementary thought-reading."

His intention, I saw, was not to perplex the good man, but to impress him with his powers so as to ensure obedience later.

"Good Lord! I had no idea—" He did not finish the sentence, and dived again abruptly into his narrative.

"I did not see anything myself, I must admit, but the stories of independent eye-witnesses were to the effect that lines of light, like streams of thin fire, moved through the wood and sometimes were seen to shoot out precisely as flames might shoot out in the direction of this house. There," he explained, in a louder voice that made me jump, pointing with a thick finger to the map, "where the westerly fringe of the plantation comes up to the end of the lower lawn at the back of the house—where it links on to those dark patches, which are laurel shrubberies, running right up to the back premises—that's where these lights were seen. They passed from the wood to the shrubberies, and in this way reached the house itself. Like silent rockets, one man described them, rapid as lightning and exceedingly bright."

"And this evidence you spoke of?"

"They actually reached the sides of the house. They've left a mark of scorching on the walls—the walls of the laundry building at the other end. You shall see 'em tomorrow." He pointed to the map to indicate the spot, and then straightened himself and glared about the room as though he had said something no one could believe and expected contradiction.

"Scorched—just as the faces were," the doctor murmured, looking significantly at me.

"Scorched—yes," repeated the Colonel, failing to catch the rest of the sentence in his excitement.

There was a prolonged silence in the room, in which I heard the gurgling of the oil in the lamp and the click of the coals and the heavy breathing of our host. The most unwelcome sensations were creeping about my spine, and I wondered whether my companion would scorn me utterly if I asked to sleep in the sofa in his room. It was eleven o'clock, I saw by the clock on the mantelpiece. We had crossed the dividing line and were now well in the movement of the adventure. The fight between my interest and my dread became acute. But, even if turning back had been possible, I think the interest would have easily gained the day.

"I have enemies, of course," I heard the Colonel's rough voice break into the pause presently, "and have discharged a number of servants—"

"It's not that," put in John Silence briefly.

"You think not? In a sense I am glad, and yet—there are some things that can be met and dealt with—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and looked down at the floor with an expression of grim severity that betrayed a momentary glimpse of character. This fighting man loathed and abhorred the thought of an enemy he could not see and come to grips with. Presently he moved over and sat down in the chair between us. Something like a sigh escaped him. Dr. Silence said nothing.

"My sister, of course, is kept in ignorance, as far as possible, of all this," he said disconnectedly, and as if talking to himself. "But even if she knew, she would find matter-of-fact explanations. I only wish I could. I'm sure they exist."

There came then an interval in the conversation that was very significant. It did not seem a real pause, or the silence real silence, for both men continued to think so rapidly and strongly that one almost imagined their thoughts clothed themselves in words in the air of the room. I was more than a little keyed up with the strange excitement of all I had heard, but what stimulated my nerves more than anything else was the obvious fact that the doctor was clearly upon the trail of discovery. In his mind at that moment, I believe, he had already solved the nature of this perplexing psychical problem. His face was like a mask, and he employed the absolute minimum of gesture and words. All his energies were directed inwards, and by those incalculable methods and processes he had mastered with such infinite patience and study, I felt sure he was already in touch with the forces behind these singular phenomena and laying his deep plans for bringing them into the open, and then effectively dealing with them.

Colonel Wragge meanwhile grew more and more fidgety. From time to time he turned towards my companion, as though about to speak, yet always changing his mind at the last moment. Once he went over and opened the door suddenly, apparently to see if any one were listening at the keyhole, for he disappeared a moment between the two doors, and I then heard him open the outer one. He stood there for some seconds and made a noise as though he were sniffing the air like a dog. Then he closed both doors cautiously and came back to the fireplace. A strange excitement seemed growing upon him. Evidently he was trying to make up his mind to say something that he found it difficult to say. And John Silence, as I rightly judged, was waiting patiently for him to choose his own opportunity and his own way of saying it. At last he turned and faced us, squaring his great shoulders, and stiffening perceptibly.

Dr. Silence looked up sympathetically. "Your own experiences help me most," he observed quietly.

"The fact is," the Colonel said, speaking very low, "this past week there have been outbreaks of fire in the house itself. Three separate outbreaks—and all—in my sister's room."

"Yes," the doctor said, as if this was just what he had expected to hear.

"Utterly unaccountable—all of them," added the other, and then sat down. I began to understand something of the reason of his excitement. He was realising at last that the "natural" explanation he had held to all along was becoming impossible, and he hated it. It made him angry.

"Fortunately," he went on, "she was out each time and does not know. But I have made her sleep now in a room on the ground floor."

"A wise precaution," the doctor said simply. He asked one or two questions. The fires had started in the curtains—once by the window and once by the bed. The third time smoke had been discovered by the maid coming from the cupboard, and it was found that Miss Wragge's clothes hanging on the hooks were smouldering. The doctor listened attentively, but made no comment.

"And now can you tell me," he said presently, "what your own feeling about it is—your general impression?"

"It sounds foolish to say so," replied the soldier, after a moment's hesitation, "but I feel exactly as I have often felt on active service in my Indian campaigns: just as if the house and all in it were in a state of siege; as though a concealed enemy were encamped about us—in ambush somewhere." He uttered a soft nervous laugh. "As if the next sign of smoke would precipitate a panic—a dreadful panic."

The picture came before me of the night shadowing the house, and the twisted pine trees he had described crowding about it, concealing some powerful enemy; and, glancing at the resolute face and figure of the old soldier, forced at length to his confession, I understood something of all he had been through before he sought the assistance of John Silence.

"And tomorrow, unless I am mistaken, is full moon," said the doctor suddenly, watching the other's face for the effect of his apparently careless words.

Colonel Wragge gave an uncontrollable start, and his face for the first time showed unmistakable pallor. "What in the world—?" he began, his lip quivering.

"Only that I am beginning to see light in this extraordinary affair," returned the other calmly, "and, if my theory is correct, each month when the moon is at the full should witness an increase in the activity of the phenomena."

"I don't see the connection," Colonel Wragge answered almost savagely,

"but I am bound to say my diary bears you out." He wore the most puzzled expression I have ever seen upon an honest face, but he abhorred this additional corroboration of an explanation that perplexed him.

"I confess," he repeated, "I cannot see the connection."

"Why should you?" said the doctor, with his first laugh that evening. He got up and hung the map upon the wall again. "But I do—because these things are my special study—and let me add that I have yet to come across a problem that is not natural, and has not a natural explanation. It's merely a question of how much one knows—and admits."

Colonel Wragge eyed him with a new and curious respect in his face. But his feelings were soothed. Moreover, the doctor's laugh and change of manner came as a relief to all, and broke the spell of grave suspense that had held us so long. We all rose and stretched our limbs, and took little walks about the room.

"I am glad, Dr. Silence, if you will allow me to say so, that you are here," he said simply, "very glad indeed. And now I fear I have kept you both up very late," with a glance to include me, "for you must be tired, and ready for your beds. I have told you all there is to tell," he added, "and tomorrow you must feel perfectly free to take any steps you think necessary."

The end was abrupt, yet natural, for there was nothing more to say, and neither of these men talked for mere talking's sake.

Out in the cold and chilly hall he lit our candles and took us upstairs. The house was at rest and still, every one asleep. We moved softly. Through the windows on the stairs we saw the moonlight falling across the lawn, throwing deep shadows. The nearer pine trees were just visible in the distance, a wall of impenetrable blackness.

Our host came for a moment to our rooms to see that we had everything. He pointed to a coil of strong rope lying beside the window, fastened to the wall by means of an iron ring. Evidently it had been recently put in.

"I don't think we shall need it," Dr. Silence said, with a smile.

"I trust not," replied our host gravely. "I sleep quite close to you across the landing," he whispered, pointing to his door, "and if you—if you want anything in the night you will know where to find me."

He wished us pleasant dreams and disappeared down the passage into his room, shading the candle with his big muscular hand from the draughts.

John Silence stopped me a moment before I went. "You know what it is?" I asked, with an excitement that even overcame my weariness.

"Yes," he said, "I'm almost sure. And you?"

"Not the smallest notion."

He looked disappointed, but not half as disappointed as I felt. "Egypt," he whispered, "Egypt!"

2

NOTHING HAPPENED TO DISTURB ME in the night—nothing, that is, except a nightmare in which Colonel Wragge chased me amid thin streaks of fire, and his sister always prevented my escape by suddenly rising up out of the ground in her chair—dead. The deep baying of dogs woke me once, just before the dawn, it must have been, for I saw the window frame against the sky; there was a flash of lightning, too, I thought, as I turned over in bed. And it was warm, for October oppressively warm.

It was after eleven o'clock when our host suggested going out with the guns, these, we understood, being a somewhat thin disguise for our true purpose. Personally, I was glad to be in the open air, for the atmosphere of the house was heavy with presentiment. The sense of impending disaster hung over all. Fear stalked the passages, and lurked in the corners of every room. It was a house haunted, but really haunted; not by some vague shadow of the dead, but by a definite though incalculable influence that was actively alive, and dangerous. At the least smell of smoke the entire household quivered. An odour of burning, I was convinced, would paralyse all the inmates. For the servants, though professedly ignorant by the master's unspoken orders, yet shared the common dread; and the hideous uncertainty, joined with this display of so spiteful and calculated a spirit of malignity, provided a kind of black doom that draped not only the walls, but also the minds of the people living within them.

Only the bright and cheerful vision of old Miss Wragge being pushed about the house in her noiseless chair, chatting and nodding briskly to every one she met, prevented us from giving way entirely to the depression which governed the majority. The sight of her was like a gleam of sunshine through the depths of some ill-omened wood, and just as we went out I saw her being wheeled along by her attendant into the sunshine of the back lawn, and caught her cheery smile as she turned her head and wished us good sport.

The morning was October at its best. Sunshine glistened on the dew-drenched grass and on leaves turned golden-red. The dainty

messengers of coming hoar-frost were already in the air, asearch for permanent winter quarters. From the wide moors that everywhere swept up against the sky, like a purple sea splashed by the occasional grey of rocky clefts, there stole down the cool and perfumed wind of the west. And the keen taste of the sea ran through all like a master-flavour, borne over the spaces perhaps by the seagulls that cried and circled high in the air.

But our host took little interest in this sparkling beauty, and had no thought of showing off the scenery of his property. His mind was otherwise intent, and, for that matter, so were our own.

"Those bleak moor and hills stretch unbroken for hours," he said, with a sweep of the hand; "and over there, some four miles," pointing in another direction, "lies S— Bay, a long, swampy inlet of the sea, haunted by myriads of seabirds. On the other side of the house are the plantations and pinewoods. I thought we would get the dogs and go first to the Twelve Acre Wood I told you about last night. It's quite near."

We found the dogs in the stable, and I recalled the deep baying of the night when a fine bloodhound and two great Danes leaped out to greet us. Singular companions for guns, I thought to myself, as we struck out across the fields and the great creatures bounded and ran beside us, nose to ground.

The conversation was scanty. John Silence's grave face did not encourage talk. He wore the expression I knew well—that look of earnest solicitude which meant that his whole being was deeply absorbed and preoccupied. Frightened, I had never seen him, but anxious often—it always moved me to witness it—and he was anxious now.

"On the way back you shall see the laundry building." Colonel Wragge observed shortly, for he, too, found little to say. "We shall attract less attention then."

Yet not all the crisp beauty of the morning seemed able to dispel the feelings of uneasy dread that gathered increasingly about our minds as we went.

In a very few minutes a clump of pine trees concealed the house from view, and we found ourselves on the outskirts of a densely-grown plantation of conifers. Colonel Wragge stopped abruptly, and, producing a map from his pocket, explained once more very briefly its position with regard to the house. He showed how it ran up almost to the walls of the laundry building—though at the moment beyond our actual view—and pointed to the windows of his sister's bedroom where the fires had been. The room, now empty, looked straight on to the wood. Then, glancing

nervously about him, and calling the dogs to heel, he proposed that we should enter the plantation and make as thorough examination of it as we thought worth while. The dogs, he added, might perhaps be persuaded to accompany us a little way—and he pointed to where they cowered at his feet—but he doubted it. "Neither voice nor whip will get them very far, I'm afraid," he said. "I know by experience."

"If you have no objection," replied Dr. Silence, with decision, and speaking almost for the first time, "we will make our examination alone—Mr. Hubbard and myself. It will be best so."

His tone was absolutely final, and the Colonel acquiesced so politely that even a less intuitive man than myself must have seen that he was genuinely relieved. "You doubtless have good reasons," he said.

"Merely that I wish to obtain my impressions uncoloured. This delicate clue I am working on might be so easily blurred by the thought-currents of another mind with strongly preconceived ideas."

"Perfectly. I understand," rejoined the soldier, though with an expression of countenance that plainly contradicted his words. "Then I will wait here with the dogs; and we'll have a look at the laundry on our way home."

I turned once to look back as we clambered over the low stone wall built by the late owner, and saw his straight, soldierly figure standing in the sunlit field watching us with a curiously intent look on his face. There was something to me incongruous, yet distinctly pathetic, in the man's efforts to meet all far-fetched explanation of the mystery with contempt, and at the same time in his stolid, unswerving investigation of it all. He nodded at me and made a gesture of farewell with his hand. That picture of him, standing in the sunshine with his big dogs, steadily watching us, remains with me to this day.

Dr. Silence led the way in among the twisted trunks, planted closely together in serried ranks, and I followed sharp at his heels. The moment we were out of sight he turned and put down his gun against the roots of a big tree, and I did likewise. "We shall hardly want these cumbersome weapons of murder," he observed, with a passing smile.

"You are sure of your clue, then?" I asked at once, bursting with curiosity, yet fearing to betray it lest he should think me unworthy. His own methods were so absolutely simple and untheatrical.

"I am sure of my clue," he answered gravely. "And I think we have come just in time. You shall know in due course. For the present—be content to follow and observe. And think steadily. The support of your mind will help me."

His voice had that quiet mastery in it which leads men to face death with a sort of happiness and pride. I would have followed him anywhere at that moment. At the same time his words conveyed a sense of dread seriousness. I caught the thrill of his confidence; but also, in this broad light of day, I felt the measure of alarm that lay behind.

"You still have no strong impressions?" he asked. "Nothing happened in the night, for instance? No vivid dreamings?"

He looked closely for my answer, I was aware.

"I slept almost an unbroken sleep. I was tremendously tired, you know, and, but for the oppressive heat—"

"Good! You still notice the heat, then," he said to himself, rather than expecting an answer. "And the lightning?" he added, "that lightning out of a clear sky—that flashing—did you notice *that?*"

I answered truly that I thought I had seen a flash during a moment of wakefulness, and he then drew my attention to certain facts before moving on.

"You remember the sensation of warmth when you put the letter to your forehead in the train; the heat generally in the house last evening, and as you now mention, in the night. You heard, too, the Colonel's stories about the appearances of fire in this wood and in the house itself, and the way his brother and the gamekeeper came to their deaths twenty years ago."

I nodded, wondering what in the world it all meant.

"And you get no clue from these facts?" he asked, a trifle surprised.

I searched every corner of my mind and imagination for some inkling of his meaning, but was obliged to admit that I understood nothing so far.

"Never mind; you will later. And now," he added, "we will go over the wood and see what we can find."

His words explained to me something of his method. We were to keep our minds alert and report to each other the least fancy that crossed the picture-gallery of our thoughts. Then, just as we started, he turned again to me with a final warning.

"And, for your safety," he said earnestly, "imagine *now*—and for that matter, imagine always until we leave this place—imagine with the utmost keenness, that you are surrounded by a shell that protects you. Picture yourself inside a protective envelope, and build it up with the most intense imagination you can evoke. Pour the whole force of your thought and will into it. Believe vividly all through this adventure that such a shell, constructed of your thought, will and imagination, surrounds you completely, and that nothing can pierce it to attack."

He spoke with dramatic conviction, gazing hard at me as though to enforce his meaning, and then moved forward and began to pick his way over the rough, tussocky ground into the wood. And meanwhile, knowing the efficacy of his prescription, I adopted it to the best of my ability.

The trees at once closed about us like the night. Their branches met overhead in a continuous tangle, their stems crept closer and closer, the brambly undergrowth thickened and multiplied. We tore our trousers, scratched our hands, and our eyes filled with fine dust that made it most difficult to avoid the clinging, prickly network of branches and creepers. Coarse white grass that caught our feet like string grew here and there in patches. It crowned the lumps of peaty growth that stuck up like human heads, fantastically dressed, thrusting up at us out of the ground with crests of dead hair. We stumbled and floundered among them. It was hard going, and I could well conceive it impossible to find a way at all in the night-time. We jumped, when possible, from tussock to tussock, and it seemed as though we were springing among heads on a battlefield, and that this dead white grass concealed eyes that turned to stare as we passed.

Here and there the sunlight shot in with vivid spots of white light, dazzling the sight, but only making the surrounding gloom deeper by contrast. And on two occasions we passed dark circular places in the grass where fires had eaten their mark and left a ring of ashes. Dr. Silence pointed to them, but without comment and without pausing, and the sight of them woke in me a singular realisation of the dread that lay so far only just out of sight in this adventure.

It was exhausting work, and heavy going. We kept close together. The warmth, too, was extraordinary. Yet it did not seem the warmth of the body due to violent exertion, but rather an inner heat of the mind that laid glowing hands of fire upon the heart and set the brain in a kind of steady blaze. When my companion found himself too far in advance, he waited for me to come up. The place had evidently been untouched by hand of man, keeper, forester or sportsman, for many a year: and my thoughts, as we advanced painfully, were not unlike the state of the wood itself—dark, confused, full of a haunting wonder and the shadow of fear.

By this time all signs of the open field behind us were hid. No single gleam penetrated. We might have been groping in the heart of some primeval forest. Then, suddenly, the brambles and tussocks and string-like grass came to an end; the trees opened out; and the ground began to slope upwards towards a large central mound. We had reached the middle of the plantation, and before us stood the broken Druid stones our host had mentioned. We walked easily up the little hill, between the sparser stems,

and, resting upon one of the ivy-covered boulders, looked round upon a comparatively open space, as large, perhaps, as a small London Square.

Thinking of the ceremonies and sacrifices this rough circle of prehistoric monoliths might have witnessed, I looked up into my companion's face with an unspoken question. But he read my thought and shook his head.

"Our mystery has nothing to do with these dead symbols," he said, "but with something perhaps even more ancient, and of another country altogether."

"Egypt?" I said half under my breath, hopelessly puzzled, but recalling his words in my bedroom.

He nodded. Mentally I still floundered, but he seemed intensely preoccupied and it was no time for asking questions; so while his words circled unintelligibly in my mind I looked round at the scene before me, glad of the opportunity to recover breath and some measure of composure. But hardly had I time to notice the twisted and contorted shapes of many of the pine trees close at hand when Dr. Silence leaned over and touched me on the shoulder. He pointed down the slope. And the look I saw in his eyes keyed up every nerve in my body to its utmost pitch.

A thin, almost imperceptible column of blue smoke was rising among the trees some twenty yards away at the foot of the mound. It curled up and up, and disappeared from sight among the tangled branches overhead. It was scarcely thicker than the smoke from a small brand of burning wood.

"Protect yourself! Imagine your shell strongly," whispered the doctor sharply, "and follow me closely."

He rose at once and moved swiftly down the slope towards the smoke, and I followed, afraid to remain alone. I heard the soft crunching of our steps on the pine needles. Over his shoulder I watched the thin blue spiral, without once taking my eyes off it. I hardly know how to describe the peculiar sense of vague horror inspired in me by the sight of that streak of smoke pencilling its way upwards among the dark trees. And the sensation of increasing heat as we approached was phenomenal. It was like walking towards a glowing yet invisible fire.

As we drew nearer his pace slackened. Then he stopped and pointed, and I saw a small circle of burnt grass upon the ground. The tussocks were blackened and smouldering, and from the centre rose this line of smoke, pale, blue, steady. Then I noticed a movement of the atmosphere beside us, as if the warm air were rising and the cooler air rushing in to take its

place: a little centre of wind in the stillness. Overhead the boughs stirred and trembled where the smoke disappeared. Otherwise, not a tree sighed, not a sound made itself heard. The wood was still as a graveyard. A horrible idea came to me that the course of nature was about to change without warning, *had* changed a little already, that the sky would drop, or the surface of the earth crash inwards like a broken bubble. Something, certainly, reached up to the citadel of my reason, causing its throne to shake.

John Silence moved forward again. I could not see his face, but his attitude was plainly one of resolution, of muscles and mind ready for vigorous action. We were within ten feet of the blackened circle when the smoke of a sudden ceased to rise, and vanished. The tail of the column disappeared in the air above, and at the same instant it seemed to me that the sensation of heat passed from my face, and the motion of the wind was gone. The calm spirit of the fresh October day resumed command.

Side by side we advanced and examined the place. The grass was smouldering, the ground still hot. The circle of burned earth was a foot to a foot and a half in diameter. It looked like an ordinary picnic fire-place. I bent down cautiously to look, but in a second I sprang back with an involuntary cry of alarm, for, as the doctor stamped on the ashes to prevent them spreading, a sound of hissing rose from the spot as though he had kicked a living creature. This hissing was faintly audible in the air. It moved past us, away towards the thicker portion of the wood in the direction of our field, and in a second Dr. Silence had left the fire and started in pursuit.

And then began the most extraordinary hunt of invisibility I can ever conceive.

He went fast even at the beginning, and, of course, it was perfectly obvious that he was following something. To judge by the poise of his head he kept his eyes steadily at a certain level—just above the height of a man—and the consequence was he stumbled a good deal over the roughness of the ground. The hissing sound had stopped. There was no sound of any kind, and what he saw to follow was utterly beyond me. I only know, that in mortal dread of being left behind, and with a biting curiosity to see whatever there was to be seen, I followed as quickly as I could, and even then barely succeeded in keeping up with him.

And, as we went, the whole mad jumble of the Colonel's stories ran through my brain, touching a sense of frightened laughter that was only held in check by the sight of this earnest, hurrying figure before me. For John Silence at work inspired me with a kind of awe. He looked so

diminutive among these giant twisted trees, while yet I knew that his purpose and his knowledge were so great, and even in hurry he was dignified. The fancy that we were playing some queer, exaggerated game together met the fact that we were two men dancing upon the brink of some possible tragedy, and the mingling of the two emotions in my mind was both grotesque and terrifying.

He never turned in his mad chase, but pushed rapidly on, while I panted after him like a figure in some unreasoning nightmare. And, as I ran, it came upon me that he had been aware all the time, in his quiet, internal way, of many things that he had kept for his own secret consideration; he had been watching, waiting, planning from the very moment we entered the shade of the wood. By some inner, concentrated process of mind, dynamic if not actually magical, he had been in direct contact with the source of the whole adventure, the very essence of the real mystery. And now the forces were moving to a climax. Something was about to happen, something important, something possibly dreadful. Every nerve, every sense, every significant gesture of the plunging figure before me proclaimed the fact just as surely as the skies, the winds, and the face of the earth tell the birds the time to migrate and warn the animals that danger lurks and they must move.

In a few moments we reached the foot of the mound and entered the tangled undergrowth that lay between us and the sunlight of the field. Here the difficulties of fast travelling increased a hundredfold. There were brambles to dodge, low boughs to dive under, and countless tree trunks closing up to make a direct path impossible. Yet Dr. Silence never seemed to falter or hesitate. He went, diving, jumping, dodging, ducking, but ever in the same main direction, following a clean trail. Twice I tripped and fell, and both times, when I picked myself up again, I saw him ahead of me, still forcing a way like a dog after its quarry. And sometimes, like a dog, he stopped and pointed—human pointing it was, psychic pointing,—and each time he stopped to point I heard that faint high hissing in the air beyond us. The instinct of an infallible dowser possessed him, and he made no mistakes.

At length, abruptly, I caught up with him, and found that we stood at the edge of the shallow pond Colonel Wragge had mentioned in his account the night before. It was long and narrow, filled with dark brown water, in which the trees were dimly reflected. Not a ripple stirred its surface.

"Watch!" he cried out, as I came up. "It's going to cross. It's bound to

betray itself. The water is its natural enemy, and we shall see the direction."

And, even as he spoke, a thin line like the track of a water-spider, shot swiftly across the shiny surface; there was a ghost of steam in the air above; and immediately I became aware of an odour of burning.

Dr. Silence turned and shot a glance at me that made me think of lightning. I began to shake all over. "Quick!" he cried with excitement, "to the trail again! We must run round. It's going to the house!"

The alarm in his voice quite terrified me. Without a false step I dashed round the slippery banks and dived again at his heels into the sea of bushes and tree trunks. We were now in the thick of the very dense belt that ran round the outer edge of the plantation, and the field was near; yet so dark was the tangle that it was some time before the first shafts of white sunlight became visible. The doctor now ran in zigzags. He was following something that dodged and doubled quite wonderfully, yet had begun, I fancied, to move more slowly than before.

"Quick!" he cried. "In the light we shall lose it!"

I still saw nothing, heard nothing, caught no suggestion of a trail; yet this man, guided by some interior divining that seemed infallible, made no false turns, though how we failed to crash headlong into the trees has remained a mystery to me ever since. And then, with a sudden rush, we found ourselves on the skirts of the wood with the open field lying in bright sunshine before our eyes.

"Too late!" I heard him cry, a note of anguish in his voice. "It's out—and, by God, it's making for the house!"

I saw the Colonel standing in the field with his dogs where we had left him. He was bending double, peering into the wood where he heard us running, and he straightened up like a bent whip released. John Silence dashed passed, calling him to follow.

"We shall lose the trail in the light," I heard him cry as he ran. "But quick! We may yet get there in time!"

That wild rush across the open field, with the dogs at our heels, leaping and barking, and the elderly Colonel behind us running as though for his life, shall I ever forget it? Though I had only vague ideas of the meaning of it all, I put my best foot forward, and, being the youngest of the three, I reached the house an easy first. I drew up, panting, and turned to wait for the others. But, as I turned, something moving a little distance away caught my eye, and in that moment I swear I experienced the most overwhelming and singular shock of surprise and terror I have ever known, or can conceive as possible.

For the front door was open, and the waist of the house being narrow, I could see through the hall into the dining-room beyond, and so out on to the back lawn, and there I saw no less a sight than the figure of Miss Wragge—running. Even at that distance it was plain that she had seen me, and was coming fast toward me, running with the frantic gait of a terror-stricken woman. She had recovered the use of her legs.

Her face was a livid grey, as of death itself, but the general expression was one of laughter, for her mouth was gaping, and her eyes, always bright, shone with the light of a wild merriment that seemed the merriment of a child, yet was singularly ghastly. And that very second, as she fled past me into her brother's arms behind, I smelt again most unmistakably the odour of burning, and to this day the smell of smoke and fire can come very near to turning me sick with the memory of what I had seen.

Fast on her heels, too, came the terrified attendant, more mistress of herself, and able to speak—which the old lady could not do—but with a face almost, if not quite, as fearful.

"We were down by the bushes in the sun,"—she gasped and screamed in reply to Colonel Wragge's distracted questionings,—"I was wheeling the chair as usual when she shrieked and leaped—I don't know exactly—I was too frightened to see—Oh, my God! she jumped clean out of the chair—*and ran!* There was a blast of hot air from the wood, and she hid her face and jumped. She didn't make a sound—she didn't cry out, or make a sound. She just ran."

But the nightmare horror of it all reached the breaking point a few minutes later, and while I was still standing in the hall temporarily bereft of speech and movement; for while the doctor, the Colonel and the attendant were halfway up the staircase, helping the fainting woman to the privacy of her room, and all in a confused group of dark figures, there sounded a voice behind me, and I turned to see the butler, his face dripping with perspiration, his eyes starting out of his head.

"The laundry's on fire!" he cried; "the laundry building's a-caught!"

I remember his odd expression "a-caught," and wanting to laugh, but finding my face rigid and inflexible.

"The devil's about again, s'help me Gawd!" he cried, in a voice thin with terror, running about in circles.

And then the group on the stairs scattered as at the sound of a shot, and the Colonel and Dr. Silence came down three steps at a time, leaving the afflicted Miss Wragge to the care of her single attendant.

We were out across the front lawn in a moment and round the corner of the house, the Colonel leading, Silence and I at his heels, and the portly butler puffing some distance in the rear, getting more and more mixed in his addresses to God and the devil; and the moment we passed the stables and came into view of the laundry building, we saw a wicked-looking volume of smoke pouring out of the narrow windows, and the frightened women-servants and grooms running hither and thither, calling aloud as they ran.

The arrival of the master restored order instantly, and this retired soldier, poor thinker perhaps, but capable man of action, had the matter in hand from the start. He issued orders like a martinet, and, almost before I could realise it, there were streaming buckets on the scene and a line of men and women formed between the building and the stable pump.

"Inside," I heard John Silence cry, and the Colonel followed him through the door, while I was just quick enough at their heels to hear him add, "the smoke's the worst part of it. There's no fire yet, I think."

And, true enough, there was no fire. The interior was thick with smoke, but it speedily cleared and not a single bucket was used upon the floor or walls. The air was stifling, the heat fearful.

"There's precious little to burn in here; it's all stone," the Colonel exclaimed, coughing. But the doctor was pointing to the wooden covers of the great cauldron in which the clothes were washed, and we saw that these were smouldering and charred. And when we sprinkled half a bucket of water on them the surrounding bricks hissed and fizzed and sent up clouds of steam. Through the open door and windows this passed out with the rest of the smoke, and we three stood there on the brick floor staring at the spot and wondering, each in our own fashion, how in the name of natural law the place could have caught fire or smoked at all. And each was silent—myself from sheer incapacity and befuddlement, the Colonel from the quiet pluck that faces all things yet speaks little, and John Silence from the intense mental grappling with this latest manifestation of a profound problem that called for concentration of thought rather than for any words.

There was really nothing to say. The facts were indisputable.

Colonel Wragge was the first to utter. "My sister," he said briefly, and moved off. In the yard I heard him sending the frightened servants about their business in an excellently matter-of-fact voice, scolding some one roundly for making such a big fire and letting the flues get over-heated, and paying no heed to the stammering reply that no fire had been lit there

for several days. Then he dispatched a groom on horseback for the local doctor.

Then Dr. Silence turned and looked at me. The absolute control he possessed, not only over the outward expression of emotion by gesture, change of colour, light in the eyes, and so forth, but also as I well knew, over its very birth in his heart, the mask-like face of the dead he could assume at will, made it extremely difficult to know at any given moment what was at work in his inner consciousness. But now, when he turned and looked at me, there was no sphinx-expression there, but rather the keen, triumphant face of a man who had solved a dangerous and complicated problem, and saw his way to a clean victory.

"*Now* do you guess?" he asked quietly, as though it were the simplest matter in the world, and ignorance were impossible.

I could only stare stupidly and remain silent. He glanced down at the charred cauldron-lids, and traced a figure in the air with his finger. But I was too excited, or too mortified, or still too dazed, perhaps, to see what it was he outlined, or what it was he meant to convey. I could only go on staring and shaking my puzzled head.

"A fire-elemental," he cried, "a fire-elemental of the most powerful and malignant kind—"

"A what?" thundered the voice of Colonel Wragge behind us, having returned suddenly and overheard.

"It's a fire-elemental," repeated Dr. Silence more calmly, but with a note of triumph in his voice he could not keep out,"and a fire-elemental enraged."

The light began to dawn in my mind at last. But the Colonel who had never heard the term before, and was besides feeling considerably worked-up for a plain man with all this mystery he knew not how to grapple with—the Colonel stood, with the most dumfoundered look ever seen on a human countenance, and continued to roar, and stammer, and stare.

"And why," he began, savage with the desire to find something visible he could fight--"why, in the name of all the blazes—?" and then stopped as John Silence moved up and took his arm.

"There, my dear Colonel Wragge," he said gently, "you touch the heart of the whole thing. You ask 'Why.' That is precisely our problem." He held the soldier's eyes firmly with his own. "And that, too, I think, we shall soon know. Come and let us talk over a plan of action—that room with the double doors, perhaps."

The word "action" calmed him a little, and he led the way, without

further speech, back into the house, and down the long stone passage to the room where we had heard his stories on the night of our arrival. I understood from the doctor's glance that my presence would not make the interview easier for our host, and I went upstairs to my own room—shaking.

But in the solitude of my room the vivid memories of the last hour revived so mercilessly that I began to feel I should never in my whole life lose the dreadful picture of Miss Wragge running—that dreadful human climax after all the non-human mystery in the wood—and I was not sorry when a servant knocked at my door and said that Colonel Wragge would be glad if I would join them in the little smoking-room.

"I think it is better you should be present," was all Colonel Wragge said as I entered the room. I took the chair with my back to the window. There was still an hour before lunch, though I imagine that the usual divisions of the day hardly found a place in the thoughts of any one of us.

The atmosphere of the room was what I might call electric. The Colonel was positively bristling; he stood with his back to the fire, fingering an unlit black cigar, his face flushed, his being obviously roused and ready for action. He hated this mystery. It was poisonous to his nature, and he longed to meet something face to face—something he could gauge and fight. Dr. Silence, I noticed at once, was sitting before the map of the estate which was spread upon a table. I knew by his expression the state of his mind. He was in the thick of it all, knew it, delighted in it, and was working at high pressure. He recognised my presence with a lifted eyelid, and the flash of the eye, contrasted with his stillness and composure, told me volumes.

"I was about to explain to our host briefly what seems to me afoot in all this business," he said without looking up, "when he asked that you should join us so that we can all work together." And, while signifying my assent, I caught myself wondering what quality it was in the calm speech of this undemonstrative man that was so full of power, so charged with the strange, virile personality behind it and that seemed to inspire us with his own confidence as by a process of radiation.

"Mr. Hubbard," he went on gravely, turning to the soldier, "knows something of my methods, and in more than one—er—interesting situation has proved of assistance. What we want now"—and here he suddenly got up and took his place on the mat beside the Colonel, and looked hard at him—"is men who have self-control, who are sure of themselves, whose minds at the critical moment will emit positive forces, instead of the

wavering and uncertain currents due to negative feelings—due, for instance, to fear."

He looked at us each in turn. Colonel Wragge moved his feet farther apart, and squared his shoulders; and I felt guilty but said nothing, conscious that my latent store of courage was being deliberately hauled to the front. He was winding me up like a clock.

"So that, in what is yet to come," continued our leader, "each of us will contribute his share of power, and ensure success for my plan."

"I'm not afraid of anything I can *see*," said the Colonel bluntly.

"I'm ready," I heard myself say, as it were automatically, "for anything," and then added, feeling the declaration was lamely insufficient, "and everything."

Dr. Silence left the mat and began walking to and fro about the room, both hands plunged deep into the pockets of his shooting-jacket. Tremendous vitality streamed from him. I never took my eyes off the small, moving figure; small, yes,—and yet somehow making me think of a giant plotting the destruction of worlds. And his manner was gentle, as always, soothing almost, and his words uttered quietly without emphasis or emotion. Most of what he said was addressed, though not too obviously, to the Colonel.

"The violence of this sudden attack," he said softly, pacing to and fro beneath the bookcase at the end of the room, "is due, of course, partly to the fact that tonight the moon is at the full"—here he glanced at me for a moment—"and partly to the fact that we have all been so deliberately concentrating upon the matter. Our thinking, our investigation, has stirred it into unusual activity. I mean that the intelligent force behind these manifestations has realized that some one is busied about its destruction. And it is now on the defensive: more, it is aggressive."

"But 'it'—what is 'it'?" began the soldier, fuming. "What, in the name of all that's dreadful, *is* a fire-elemental?"

"I cannot give you at this moment," replied Dr. Silence, turning to him, but undisturbed by the interruption, "a lecture on the nature and history of magic, but can only say that an Elemental is the active force behind the elements,—whether earth, air, water, *or fire*,—it is impersonal in its essential nature, but can be focused, personified, ensouled, so to say, by those who know how—by magicians, if you will—for certain purposes of their own, much in the same way that steam and electricity can be harnessed by the practical man of this century.

"Alone, these blind elemental energies can accomplish little, but governed and directed by the trained will of a powerful manipulator they

may become potent activities for good or evil. They are the basis of all magic, and it is the motive behind them that constitutes the magic 'black' or 'white'; they can be the vehicles of curses or of blessings, for a curse is nothing more than the thought of a violent will perpetuated. And in such cases—cases like this—the conscious, directing will of the mind that is using the elemental stands always behind the phenomena—"

"You think that my brother—!" broke in the Colonel, aghast.

"Has nothing whatever to do with it—directly. The fire-elemental that has here been tormenting you and your household was sent upon its mission long before you, or your family, or your ancestors, or even the nation you belong to—unless I am much mistaken—was ever in existence. We will come to that a little later; after the experiment I propose to make we shall be more positive. At present I can only say we have to deal now, not only with the phenomenon of Attacking Fire merely, but with the vindictive and enraged intelligence that is directing it from behind the scenes—vindictive and enraged," he repeated the words.

"That explains—" began Colonel Wragge, seeking furiously for words he could not find quickly enough.

"Much," said John Silence, with a gesture to restrain him.

He stopped a moment in the middle of his walk, and a deep silence came down over the little room. Through the windows the sunlight seemed less bright, the long line of dark hills less fi , making me think of a vast wave towering to heaven and about to break and overwhelm us. Something formidable had crept into the world about us. For, undoubtedly, there was a disquieting thought, holding terror as well as awe, in the picture his words conjured up: the conception of a human will reaching its deathless hand, spiteful and destructive, down through the ages, to strike the living and afflict the innocent.

"But what *is* its object?" burst out the soldier, unable to restrain himself longer in the silence. "Why does it come from that plantation? And why should it attack us, or any one in particular?" Questions began to pour from him in a stream.

"All in good time," the doctor answered quietly, having let him run on for several minutes. "But I must first discover positively what, or who, it is that directs this particular fire-elemental. And, to do that, we must first"—he spoke with slow deliberation—"seek to capture—to confine by visibility—to limit its sphere in a concrete form."

"Good heavens almighty!" exclaimed the soldier, mixing his words in his unfeigned surprise.

"Quite so," pursued the other calmly; "for in so doing I think we can

release it from the purpose that binds it, restore it to its normal condition of latent fire, and also"—he lowered his voice perceptibly—"also discover the face and form of the Being that ensouls it."

"The man behind the gun!" cried the Colonel, beginning to understand something, and leaning forward so as not to miss a single syllable.

"I mean that in the last resort, before it returns to the womb of potential fire, it will probably assume the face and figure of its Director, of the man of magical knowledge who originally bound it with his incantations and sent it forth upon its mission of centuries."

The soldier sat down and gasped openly in his face, breathing hard; but it was a very subdued voice that framed the question. "And how do you propose to make it visible? How capture and confine it? What d'ye mean, Dr. John Silence?"

"By furnishing it with the materials for a form. By the process of materialisation simply. Once limited by dimensions, it will become slow, heavy, visible. We can then dissipate it. Invisible fire, you see, is dangerous and incalculable; locked up in a form we can perhaps manage it. We must betray it—to its death."

"And this material?" we asked in the same breath, although I think I had already guessed.

"Not pleasant, but effective," came the quiet reply; "the exhalations of freshly-spilled blood."

"Not human blood!" cried Colonel Wragge, starting up from his chair with a voice like an explosion. I thought his eyes would start from their sockets.

The face of Dr. Silence relaxed in spite of himself, and his spontaneous little laugh brought a welcome though momentary relief.

"The days of human sacrifice, I hope, will never come again," he explained. "Animal blood will answer the purpose, and we can make the experiment as pleasant as possible. Only, the blood must be freshly spilled and strong with the vital emanations that attract this peculiar class of elemental creature. Perhaps perhaps if some pig on the estate is ready for the market—"

He turned to hide a smile; but the passing touch of comedy found no echo in the mind of our host, who did not understand how to change quickly from one emotion to another. Clearly he was debating many things laboriously in his honest brain. But, in the end, the earnestness and scientific disinterestedness of the doctor, whose influence over him was already very great, won the day, and he presently looked up more calmly,

and observed shortly that he thought perhaps the matter could be arranged.

"There are other and pleasanter methods," Dr. Silence went on to explain, "but they require time and preparation, and things have gone much too far, in my opinion, to admit of delay. And the process need cause you no distress: we sit round the bowl and await results. Nothing more. The emanations of blood—which, as Levi says, is the first incarnation of the universal fluid—furnish the materials out of which the creatures of discarnate life, spirits if you prefer, can fashion themselves a temporary appearance. The process is old, and lies at the root of all blood sacrifice. It was known to the priests of Baal, and it is known to the modern ecstasy dancers who cut themselves to produce objective phantoms who dance with them. And the least gifted clairvoyant could tell you that the forms to be seen in the vicinity of slaughterhouses, or hovering above the deserted battlefield, are—well, simply beyond all description. I do not mean," he added, noticing the uneasy fidgeting of his host, "that anything in our laundry-experiment need appear to terrify us, for this case seems a comparatively simple one, and it is only the vindictive character of the intelligence directing this fire-elemental that causes anxiety and makes for personal danger."

"It is curious," said the Colonel, with a sudden rush of words, drawing a deep breath, and as though speaking of things distasteful to him, "that during my years among the Hill Tribes of Northern India I came across—personally came across—instances of the sacrifices of blood to certain deities being stopped suddenly, and all manner of disasters happening until they were resumed. Fires broke out in the huts, and even on the clothes, of the natives—and—and I admit I have read, in the course of my studies,"—he made a gesture towards his books and heavily laden table,—"of the Yezidis of Syria evoking phantoms by means of cutting their bodies with knives during their whirling dances—enormous globes of fire which turned into monstrous and terrible forms—and I remember an account somewhere, too, how the emaciated forms and pallid countenances of the spectres that appeared to the Emperor Julian, claimed to be the true Immortals, and told him to renew the sacrifices of blood 'for the fumes of which, since the establishment of Christianity, they had been pining'—that these were in reality the phantoms evoked by the rites of blood."

Both Dr. Silence and myself listened in amazement, for this sudden speech was so unexpected, and betrayed so much more knowledge than we had either of us suspected in the old soldier.

"Then perhaps you have read, too," said the doctor, "how the Cosmic Deities of savage races, elemental in their nature, have been kept alive through many ages by these blood rites?"

"No," he answered; "that is new to me."

"In any case," Dr. Silence added, "I am glad you are not wholly unfamiliar with the subject, for you will now bring more sympathy, and therefore more help, to our experiment. For, of course, in this case, we only want the blood to tempt the creature from its lair and enclose it in a form—"

"I quite understand. And I only hesitated just now," he went on, his words coming much more slowly, as though he felt he had already said too much, "because I wished to be quite sure it was no mere curiosity, but an actual sense of necessity that dictated this horrible experiment."

"It is your safety, and that of your household, and of your sister, that is at stake," replied the doctor. "Once I have *seen*, I hope to discover whence this elemental comes, and what its real purpose is."

Colonel Wragge signified his assent with a bow.

"And the moon will help us," the other said, "for it will be full in the early hours of the morning, and this kind of elemental-being is always most active at the period of full moon. Hence, you see, the clue furnished by your diary."

So it was finally settled. Colonel Wragge would provide the materials for the experiment, and we were to meet at midnight. How he would contrive at that hour—but that was his business. I only know we both realised that he would keep his word, and whether a pig died at midnight, or at noon, was after all perhaps only a question of the sleep and personal comfort of the executioner.

"Tonight, then, in the laundry," said Dr. Silence finally, to clinch the plan; "we three alone—and at midnight, when the household is asleep and we shall be free from disturbance."

He exchanged significant glances with our host, who, at that moment, was called away by the announcement that the family doctor had arrived, and was ready to see him in his sister's room.

For the remainder of the afternoon John Silence disappeared. I had my suspicions that he made a secret visit to the plantation and also to the laundry building; but in any case, we saw nothing of him, and he kept strictly to himself. He was preparing for the night, I felt sure, but the nature of his preparations I could only guess. There was movement in his room, I heard, and an odour like incense hung about the door, and

knowing that he regarded rites as the vehicles of energies, my guesses were probably not far wrong.

Colonel Wragge, too, remained absent the greater part of the afternoon, and, deeply afflicted, had scarcely left his sister's bedside, but in response to my inquiry when we met for a moment at tea-time, he told me that although she had moments of attempted speech, her talk was quite incoherent and hysterical, and she was still quite unable to explain the nature of what she had seen. The doctor, he said, feared she had recovered the use of her limbs, only to lose that of her memory, and perhaps even of her mind.

"Then the recovery of her legs, I trust, may be permanent, at any rate," I ventured, finding it difficult to know what sympathy to offer. And he replied with a curious short laugh, "Oh yes; about that there can be no doubt whatever."

And it was due merely to the chance of my overhearing a fragment of conversation—unwillingly, of course—that a little further light was thrown upon the state in which the old lady actually lay. For, as I came out of my room, it happened that Colonel Wragge and the doctor were going downstairs together, and their words floated up to my ears before I could make my presence known by so much as a cough.

"Then you must find a way," the doctor was saying with decision; "for I cannot insist too strongly upon that—and at all costs she must be kept quiet. These attempts to go out must be prevented—if necessary, by force. This desire to visit some wood or other she keeps talking about is, of course, hysterical in nature. It cannot be permitted for a moment."

"It shall not be permitted," I heard the soldier reply, as they reached the hall below.

"It has impressed her mind for some reason—" the doctor went on, by way evidently of soothing explanation, and then the distance made it impossible for me to hear more.

At dinner Dr. Silence was still absent, on the public plea of a headache, and though food was sent to his room, I am inclined to believe he did not touch it, but spent the entire time fasting.

We retired early, desiring that the household should do likewise, and I must confess that at ten o'clock when I bid my host a temporary good-night, and sought my room to make what mental preparation I could, I realised in no very pleasant fashion that it was a singular and formidable assignation, this midnight meeting in the laundry building, and that there were moments in every adventure of life when a wise man, and one who knew his own limitations, owed it to his dignity to withdraw

discreetly. And, but for the character of our leader, I probably should have then and there offered the best excuse I could think of, and have allowed myself quietly to fall asleep and wait for an exciting story in the morning of what had happened. But with a man like John Silence, such a lapse was out of the question, and I sat before my fire counting the minutes and doing everything I could think of to fortify my resolution and fasten my will at the point where I could be reasonably sure that my self-control would hold against all attacks of men, devils, or elementals.

3

AT A QUARTER BEFORE MIDNIGHT, clad in a heavy ulster, and with slippered feet, I crept cautiously from my room and stole down the passage to the top of the stairs. Outside the doctor's door I waited a moment to listen. All was still; the house in utter darkness; no gleam of light beneath any door; only, down the length of the corridor, from the direction of the sick-room, came faint sounds of laughter and incoherent talk that were not things to reassure a mind already half a-tremble, and I made haste to reach the hall and let myself out through the front door into the night.

The air was keen and frosty, perfumed with night smells and exquisitely fresh; all the million candles of the sky were alight, and a faint breeze rose and fell with far-away sighings in the tops of the pine trees. My blood leaped for a moment in the spaciousness of the night, for the splendid stars brought courage; but the next instant, as I turned the corner of the house, moving stealthily down the gravel drive, my spirits sank again ominously. For, yonder, over the funereal plumes of the Twelve Acre Plantation, I saw the yellow disc of the full moon just rising in the east, staring down like some vast Being come to watch upon the progress of our doom. Seen through the distorting vapours of the earth's atmosphere, her face looked weirdly unfamiliar, her usual expression of benignant vacancy somehow a-twist. I slipped along by the shadows of the wall, keeping my eyes upon the ground.

The laundry-house, as already described, stood detached from the other offices, with laurel shrubberies crowding thickly behind it, and the kitchen-garden so close on the other side that the strong smells of soil and growing things came across almost heavily. The shadows of the haunted plantation, hugely lengthened by the rising moon behind them, reached to the very walls and covered the stone tiles of the roof with a dark pall. So keenly were my senses alert at this moment that I believe I could fill a

chapter with the endless small details of the impression I received—shadows, odour, shapes, sounds—in the space of the few seconds I stood and waited before the closed wooden door.

Then I became aware of some one moving towards me through the moonlight, and the figure of John Silence, without overcoat and bareheaded, came quickly and without noise to join me. His eyes, I saw at once, were wonderfully bright, and so marked was the shining pallor of his face that I could hardly tell when he passed from the moonlight into the shade.

He passed without a word, beckoning me to follow, and then pushed the door open, and went in.

The chill air of the place met us like that of an underground vault; and the brick floor and white-washed walls, streaked with damp and smoke, threw back the cold in our faces. Directly opposite gaped the black throat of the huge open fireplace, the ashes of wood fires still piled and scattered about the hearth, and on either side of the projecting chimney-column were the deep recess holding the big twin cauldrons for boiling clothes. Upon the lids of these cauldrons stood the two little oil lamps, shaded red, which gave all the light there was, and immediately in front of the fireplace there was a small circular table with three chairs set about it. Overhead, the narrow slit windows, high up the walls, pointed to a dim network of wooden rafters half lost among the shadows, and then came the dark vault of the roof. Cheerless and unalluring, for all the red light, it certainly was, reminding me of some unused conventicle, bare of pews or pulpit, ugly and severe, and I was forcibly struck by the contrast between the normal uses to which the place was ordinarily put, and the strange and mediaeval purpose which had brought us under its roof tonight.

Possibly an involuntary shudder ran over me, for my companion turned with a confident look to reassure me, and he was so completely master of himself that I at once absorbed from his abundance, and felt the chinks of my failing courage beginning to close up. To meet his eye in the presence of danger was like finding a mental railing that guided and supported thought along the giddy edges of alarm.

"I am quite ready," I whispered, turning to listen for approaching footsteps.

He nodded, still keeping his eyes on mine. Our whispers sounded hollow as they echoed overhead among the rafters.

"I'm glad you are here," he said. "Not all would have the courage. Keep your thoughts controlled, and imagine the protective shell round you—round your *inner* being."

"I'm all right," I repeated, cursing my chattering teeth.

He took my hand and shook it, and the contact seemed to shake into me something of his supreme confidence. The eyes and hands of a strong man can touch the soul. I think he guessed my thought, for a passing smile flashed around the corners of his mouth.

"You will feel more comfortable," he said, in a low tone, "when the chain is complete. The Colonel we can count on, of course. Remember, though," he added warningly, "he may perhaps become controlled—possessed—when the thing comes, because he won't know how to resist. And to explain the business to such a man—!" He shrugged his shoulders expressively. "But it will only be temporary, and I will see that no harm comes to him."

He glanced round at the arrangements with approval. "Red light," he said, indicating the shaded lamps, "has the lowest rate of vibration. Materialisations are dissipated by strong light—won't form, or hold together—in rapid vibrations."

I was not sure that I approved altogether of this dim light, for in complete darkness there is something protective—the knowledge that one cannot be seen, probably—which a half-light destroys, but I remembered the warning to keep my thoughts steady, and forbore to give them expression.

There was a step outside, and the figure of Colonel Wragge stood in the doorway. Though entering on tiptoe, he made considerable noise and clatter, for his free movements were impeded by the burden he carried, and we saw a large yellowish bowl held out at arms' length from his body, the mouth covered with a white cloth. His face, I noted, was rigidly composed. He, too, was master of himself. And, as I thought of this old soldier moving through the long series of alarms, worn with watching and wearied with assault, unenlightened yet undismayed, even down to the dreadful shock of his sister's terror, and still showing the dogged pluck that persists in the face of defeat, I understood what Dr. Silence meant when he described him as a man "to be counted on."

I think there was nothing beyond this rigidity of his stern features, and a certain greyness of the complexion, to betray the turmoil of the emotions that was doubtless going on within; and the quality of these two men, each in his own way, so keyed me up that, by the time the door was shut and we had exchanged silent greetings, all the latent courage I possessed was well to the fore, and I felt as sure of myself as I knew I ever could feel.

Colonel Wragge set the bowl carefully in the centre of the table.

"Midnight," he said shortly, glancing at his watch, and we all three moved to our chairs.

There, in the middle of that cold and silent place, we sat, with the vile bowl before us, and a thin, hardly perceptible steam rising through the damp air from the surface of the white cloth and disappearing upwards the moment it passed beyond the zone of red light and entered the deep shadows thrown forward by the projecting wall of chimney.

The doctor had indicated our respective places, and I found myself seated with my back to the door and opposite the black hearth. The Colonel was on my left, and Dr. Silence on my right, both half facing me, the latter more in shadow than the former. We thus divided the little table into even sections, and sitting back in our chairs we awaited events in silence.

For something like an hour I do not think there was even the faintest sound within those four walls and under the canopy of that vaulted roof. Our slippers made no scratching on the gritty floor, and our breathing was suppressed almost to nothing; even the rustle of our clothes as we shifted from time to time upon our seats was inaudible. Silence smothered us absolutely—the silence of night, of listening, the silence of a haunted expectancy. The very gurgling of the lamps was too soft to be heard, and if light itself had sound, I do not think we should have noticed the silvery tread of the moodnlight as it entered the high narrow windows and threw upon the floor the slender traces of its pallid footsteps.

Colonel Wragge and the doctor, and myself too for that matter, sat thus like figures of stone, without speech and without gesture. My eyes passed in ceaseless journeys from the bowl to their faces, and from their faces to the bowl. They might have been masks, however, for all the signs of life they gave; and the light steaming from the horrid contents beneath the white cloth had long ceased to be visible.

Then presently, as the moon rose higher, the wind rose with it. It sighed, like the lightest of passing wings, over the roof; it crept most softly round the walls; it made the brick floor like ice beneath our feet.

With it I saw mentally the desolate moorland flowing like a sea about the old house, the treeless expanse of lonely hills, the nearer copses, sombre, and mysterious in the night. *The* plantation, too, in particular I saw, and imagined I heard the mournful whisperings that must now be a-stirring among its tree-tops as the breeze played down between the twisted stems. In the depth of the room behind us the shafts of moonlight met and crossed in a growing network.

It was after an hour of this wearing and unbroken attention, and I

should judge about one o'clock in the morning, when the baying of the dogs in the stable-yard first began, and I saw John Silence move suddenly in his chair and sit up in an attitude of attention. Every force in my being instantly leaped into the keenest vigilance. Colonel Wragge moved too, though slowly, and without raising his eyes from the table before him.

The doctor stretched his arm out and took the white cloth from the bowl.

It was perhaps imagination that persuaded me the red glare of the lamps grew fainter and the air over the table before us thickened. I had been expecting something for so long that the movement of my companions, and the lifting of the cloth, may easily have caused the momentary delusion that something hovered in the air before my face, touching the skin of my cheeks with a silken run. But it was certainly not a delusion that the Colonel looked up at the same moment and glanced over his shoulder, as though his eyes followed the movements of something to and fro about the room, and that he then buttoned his overcoat more tightly about him and his eyes sought my own face first, and then the doctor's. And it was no delusion that his face seemed somehow to have turned dark, become spread as it were with a shadowy blackness. I saw his lips tighten and his expression grow hard and stern, and it came to me then with a rush that, of course, this man had told us but a part of the experiences he had been through in the house, and that there was much more he had never been able to bring himself to reveal at all. I felt sure of it. The way he turned and stared about him betrayed a familiarity with other things than those he had described to us. It was not merely a sight of fire he looked for; it was a sight of something alive, intelligent, something able to evade his searching; it was *a person*. It was the watch for the ancient Being who sought to obsess him.

And the way in which Dr. Silence answered his look—though it was only by a glance of subtlest sympathy—confirmed my impression.

"We may be ready now," I heard him say in a whisper, and I understood that his words were intended as a steadying warning, and braced myself mentally to the utmost of my power.

Yet long before Colonel Wragge had turned to stare about the room, and long before the doctor had confirmed my impression that things were at last beginning to stir, I had become aware in most singular fashion that the place held more than our three selves. With the rising of the wind this increase to our numbers had first taken place. The baying of the hounds almost seemed to have signalled it. I cannot say how it may be possible to

realise that an empty place has suddenly become—not empty, when the new arrival is nothing that appeals to any one of the senses; for this recognition of an "invisible," as of the change in the balance of personal forces in a human group, is indefiniable and beyond proof. Yet it is unmistakable. And I knew perfectly well at what given moment the atmosphere within these four walls became charged with the presence of other living beings besides ourselves. And, on reflection, I am convinced that both my companions knew it too.

"Watch the light," said the doctor under his breath, and then I knew too that it was no fancy of my own that had turned the air darker, and the way he turned to examine the face of our host sent an electric thrill of wonder and expectancy shivering along every nerve in my body.

Yet it was no kind of terror that I experienced, but rather a sort of mental dizziness, and a sensation as of being suspended in some remote and dreadful altitude where things might happen, indeed were about to happen, that had never before happened within the ken of man. Horror may have formed an ingredient, but it was not chiefly horror, and in no sense ghostly horror.

Uncommon thoughts kept beating on my brain like tiny hammers, soft yet persistent, seeking admission; their unbidden tide began to wash along the far fringes of my mind, the current of unwonted sensations to rise over the remote frontiers of my consciousness. I was aware of thoughts, and the fantasies of thoughts, that I never knew before existed. Portions of my being stirred that had never stirred before, and things ancient and inexplicable rose to the surface and beckoned me to follow. I felt as though I were about to fly off, at some immense tangent, into an outer space hitherto unknown even in dreams. And so singular was the result produced upon me that I was uncommonly glad to anchor my mind, as well as my eyes, upon the masterful personality of the doctor at my side, for there, I realised, I could draw always upon the forces of sanity and safety.

With a vigorous effort of will I returned to the scene before me, and tried to focus my attention, with steadier thoughts, upon the table, and upon the silent figures seated round it. And then I saw that certain changes had come about in the place where we sat.

The patches of moonlight on the floor, I noted, had become curiously shaded; the faces of my companions opposite were not so clearly visible as before; and the forehead and cheeks of Colonel Wragge were glistening with perspiration. I realised further, that an extraordinary change had come about in the temperature of the atmosphere. The increased warmth

had a painful effect, not alone on Colonel Wragge, but upon all of us. It was oppressive and unnatural. We gasped figuratively as well as actually.

"You are the first to feel it," said Dr. Silence in low tones, looking across at him. "You are in more intimate touch, of course ."

The Colonel was trembling, and appeared to be in considerable distress. His knees shook, so that the shuffling of his slippered feet became audible. He inclined his head to show that he had heard, but made no other reply. I think, even then, he was sore put to it to keep himself in hand. I knew what he was struggling against. As Dr. Silence had warned me, he was about to be obsessed, and was savagely, though vainly, resisting.

But, meanwhile, a curious and whirling sense of exhilaration began to come over me. The increasing heat was delightful, bringing a sensation of intense activity, of thoughts pouring through the mind at high speed, of vivid pictures in the brain, of fierce desires and lightning energies alive in every part of the body. I was conscious of no physical distress, such as the Colonel felt, but only of a vague feeling that it might all grow suddenly too intense—that I might be consumed—that my personality as well as my body, might become resolved into the flame of pure spirit. I began to live at a speed too intense to last. It was as if a thousand ecstasies besieged me.

"Steady!" whispered the voice of John Silence in my ear, and I looked up with a start to see that the Colonel had risen from his chair. The doctor rose too. I followed suit, and for the first time saw down into the bowl. To my amazement and horror I saw that the contents were troubled. The blood was astir with movement.

The rest of the experiment was witnessed by us standing. It came, too, with a curious suddenness. There was no more dreaming, for me at any rate.

I shall never forget the figure of Colonel Wragge standing there beside me, upright and unshaken, squarely planted on his feet, looking about him, puzzled beyond belief, yet full of a fighting anger. Framed by the white walls, the red glow of the lamps upon his streaming cheeks, his eyes glowing against the deathly pallor of his skin, breathing hard and making convulsive efforts of hands and body to keep himself under control, his whole being roused to the point of savage fighting, yet with nothing visible to get at anywhere—he stood there, immovable against odds. And the strange contrast of the pale skin and the burning face I had never seen before, or wish to see again.

But what has left an even sharper impression on my memory was the

blackness that then began crawling over his face, obliterating the features, concealing their human outline, and hiding him inch by inch from view. This was my first realisation that the process of materialisation was at work. His visage became shrouded. I moved from one side to the other to keep him in view, and it was only then I understood that, properly speaking, the blackness was not upon the countenance of Colonel Wragge, but that something had inserted itself between me and him, thus screening his face with the effect of a dark veil, Something that apparently rose through the floor was passing slowly into the air above the table and above the bowl. The blood in the bowl, moreover, was considerably less than before.

And, with this change in the air before us, there came at the same time a further change, I thought, in the face of the soldier. One-half was turned towards the red lamps, while the other caught the pale illumination of the moonlight falling aslant from the high windows, so that it was difficult to estimate this change with accuracy of detail. But it seemed to me that, while the features—eyes, nose, mouth—remained the same, the life informing them had undergone some profound transformation. The signature of a new power had crept into the face and left its traces there—an expression dark, and in some unexplained way, terrible.

Then suddenly he opened his mouth and spoke, and the sound of this changed voice, deep and musical though it was, made me cold and set my heart beating with uncomfortable rapidity. The Being, as he had dreaded, was already in control of his brain, using his mouth.

"I see a blackness like the blackness of Egypt before my face," said the tones of this unknown voice that seemed half his own and half another's. "And out of this darkness they come, they come."

I gave a dreadful start. The doctor turned to look at me for an instant, and then turned to centre his attention upon the figure of our host, and I understood in some intuitive fashion that he was there to watch over the strangest contest man ever saw—to watch over and, if necessary, to protect.

"He is being controlled—possessed," he whispered to me through the shadows. His face wore a wonderful expression, half triumph, half admiration.

Even as Colonel Wragge spoke, it seemed to me that this visible darkness began to increase, pouring up thickly out of the ground by the hearth, rising up in sheets and veils, shrouding our eyes and faces. It stole up from below—an awful blackness that seemed to drink in all the radiations of light in the building, leaving nothing but the ghost of a radiance in their

place. Then, out of this rising sea of shadows, issued a pale and spectral light that gradually spread itself about us, and from the heart of this light I saw the shapes of fire crowd and gather. And these were not human shapes, or the shapes of anything I recognised as alive in the world, but outlines of fire that traced globes, triangles, crosses, and the luminous bodies of various geometrical figures. They grew bright, faded, and then grew bright again with an effect almost of pulsation. They passed swiftly to and fro through the air, rising and falling, and particularly in the immediate neighbourhood of the Colonel, often gathering about his head and shoulders, and even appearing to settle upon him like giant insects of flame. They were accompanied, moreover, by a faint sound of hissing—the same sound we had heard that afternoon in the plantation.

"The fire-elementals that precede their master," the doctor said in an undertone. "Be ready."

And while this weird display of the shapes of fire alternately flashed and faded, and the hissing echoed faintly among the dim rafters overhead, we heard the awful voice issue at intervals from the lips of the afflicted soldier. It was a voice of power, splendid in some way I cannot describe, and with a certain sense of majesty in its cadences, and, as I listened to it with quickly-beating heart, I could fancy it was some ancient voice of Time itself, echoing down immense corridors of stone, from the depths of vast temples, from the very heart of mountain tombs.

"I have seen my divine Father, Osiris," thundered the great tones. "I have scattered the gloom of the night. I have burst through the earth, and am one with the starry Deities!"

Something grand came into the soldier's face. He was staring fixedly before him, as though seeing nothing.

"Watch," whispered Dr. Silence in my ear, and his whisper seemed to come from very far away.

Again the mouth opened and the awesome voice issued forth. "Thoth," it boomed, "has loosened the bandages of Set which fettered my mouth. I have taken my place in the great winds of heaven."

I heard the little wind of night, with its mournful voice of ages, sighing round the walls and over the roof.

"Listen!" came the doctor at my side, and the thunder of the voice continued—

"I have hidden myself with you, O ye stars that never diminish. I remember my name—in—the—House—of—Fire!"

The voice ceased and the sound died away. Something about the face

and figure of Colonel Wragge relaxed, I thought. The terrible look passed from his face. The Being that obsessed him was gone.

"The great Ritual," said Dr. Silence aside to me, very low, "the Book of the Dead. Now it's leaving him. Soon the blood will fashion it a body."

Colonel Wragge, who had stood absolutely motionless all this time, suddenly swayed, so that I thought he was going to fall,—and, but for the quick support of the doctor's arm, he probably would have fallen, for he staggered as in the beginning of collapse.

"I am drunk with the wine of Osiris," he cried,—and it was half with his own voice this time—"but Horus, the Eternal Watcher, is about my path—for—safety." The voice dwindled and failed, dying away into something almost like a cry of distress.

"Now, watch closely," said Dr. Silence, speaking loud, "for after the cry will come the Fire!"

I began to tremble involuntarily; an awful change had come without warning into the air; my legs grew weak as paper beneath my weight and I had to support myself by leaning on the table. Colonel Wragge, I saw, was also leaning forward with a kind of droop. The shapes of fire had vanished all, but his face was lit by the red lamps and the pale shifting moonlight rose behind him like mist.

We were both gazing at the bowl, now almost empty; the Colonel stooped so low I feared every minute he would lose his balance and drop into it; and the shadow, that had so long been in process of forming, now at length began to assume material outline in the air before us.

Then John Silence moved forward quickly. He took his place between us and the shadow. Erect, formidable, absolute master of the situation, I saw him stand there, his face calm and almost smiling, and fire in his eyes. His protective influence was astounding and incalculable. Even the abhorrent dread I felt at the sight of the creature growing into life and substance before us, lessened in some way so that I was able to keep my eyes fixed on the air above the bowl without too vivid a terror.

But as it took shape, rising out of nothing as it were, and growing momentarily more defined in outline, a period of utter and wonderful silence settled down upon the building and all it contained. A hush of ages, like the sudden centre of peace at the heart of the travelling cyclone, descended through the night, and out of this hush, as out of the emanations of the steaming blood, issued the form of the ancient being who had first sent the elemental of fire upon its mission. It grew and darkened and solidified before our eyes. It rose from just beyond the table

so that the lower portions remained invisible, but I saw the outline limn itself upon the air, as though slowly revealed by the rising of a curtain. It apparently had not then quite concentrated to the normal proportions, but was spread out on all sides into space, huge, though rapidly condensing, for I saw the colossal shoulders, the neck, the lower portion of the dark jaws, the terrible mouth, and then the teeth and lips—and, as the veil seemed to lift further upon the tremendous face—I saw the nose and cheek bones. In another moment I should have looked straight into the eyes—

But what Dr. Silence did at that moment was so unexpected, and took me so by surprise, that I have never yet properly understood its nature, and he has never yet seen fit to explain in detail to me. He uttered some sound that had a note of command in it—and, in so doing, stepped forward and intervened between me and the face. The figure, just nearing completeness, he therefore hid from my sight—and I have always thought purposely hid from my sight.

"The fire!" he cried out. "The fire! Beware!"

There was a sudden roar as of flame from the very mouth of the pit, and for the space of a single second all grew light as day. A blinding flash passed across my face, and there was heat for an instant that seemed to shrivel skin, and flesh, and bone. Then came steps, and I heard Colonel Wragge utter a great cry, wilder than any human cry I have ever known. The heat sucked all the breath out of my lungs with a rush, and the blaze of light, as it vanished, swept my vision with it into enveloping darkness.

When I recovered the use of my senses a few moments later I saw that Colonel Wragge with a face of death, its whiteness strangely stained, had moved closer to me. Dr. Silence stood beside him, an expression of triumph and success in his eyes. The next minute the soldier tried to clutch me with his hand. Then he reeled, staggered, and, unable to save himself, fell with a great crash upon the brick floor.

After the sheet of flame, a wind raged round the building as though it would lift the roof off, but then passed as suddenly as it came. And in the intense calm that followed I saw that the form had vanished, and the doctor was stooping over Colonel Wragge upon the floor, trying to lift him to a sitting position.

"Light," he said quietly, "more light. Take the shades off."

Colonel Wragge sat up and the glare of the unshaded lamps fell upon his face. It was grey and drawn, still running heat, and there was a look in the eyes and about the corners of the mouth that seemed in this short space of

time to have added years to its age. At the same time, the expression of effort and anxiety had left it. It showed relief.

"Gone!" he said, looking up at the doctor in a dazed fashion, and struggling to his feet. "Thank God! it's gone at last." He stared round the laundry as though to find out where he was. "Did it control me—take possession of me? Did I talk nonsense?" he asked bluntly. "After the heat came, I remember nothing—"

"You'll feel yourself again in a few minutes," the doctor said. To my infinite horror I saw that he was surreptitiously wiping sundry dark stains from the face: "Our experiment has been a success and—"

He gave me a swift glance to hide the bowl, standing between me and our host while I hurriedly stuffed it down under the lid of the nearest cauldron.

"—and none of us the worse for it," he finished.

"And fires?" he asked, still dazed; "there'll be no more fires?"

"It is dissipated—partly, at any rate," replied Dr. Silence cautiously.

"And the man behind the gun," he went on, only half realising what he was saying, I think; "have you discovered *that*?"

"A form materialised," said the doctor briefly. "I know for certain now what the directing intelligence was behind it all."

Colonel Wragge pulled himself together and got upon his feet. The words conveyed no clear meaning to him yet. But his memory was returning gradually, and he was trying to piece together the fragments into a connected whole. He shivered a little, for the place had grown suddenly chilly. The air was empty again, lifeless.

"You feel all right again now," Dr. Silence said, in the tone of a man stating a fact rather than asking a question.

"Thanks to you—both, yes." He drew a deep breath, and mopped his face, and even attempted a smile. He made me think of a man coming from the battlefield with the stains of fighting still upon him, but scornful of his wounds. Then he turned gravely towards the doctor with a question in his eyes. Memory had returned and he was himself again.

"Precisely what I expected," the doctor said calmly; "a fire-elemental sent upon its mission in the days of Thebes, centuries before Christ, and tonight, for the first time all these thousands of years, released from the spell that originally bound it."

We stared at him in amazement, Colonel Wragge opening his lips for words that refused to shape themselves.

"And, if we dig," he continued significantly, pointing to the floor where the blackness had poured up, "we shall find some underground

connection—a tunnel most likely—leading to the Twelve Acre Wood. It was made by—your predecessor."

"A tunnel made by my brother!" gasped the soldier. "Then my sister should know—she lived here with him—" He stopped suddenly.

John Silence inclined his head slowly. "I think so," he said quietly. "Your brother, no doubt, was as much tormented as you have been," he continued after a pause in which Colonel Wragge seemed deeply preoccupied with his thoughts, "and tried to find peace by burying it in the wood, and surrounding the wood then, like a large magic circle, with the enchantments of the old formulae. So the stars the man saw blazing—"

"But burying *what*?" asked the soldier faintly, stepping backwards towards the support of the wall.

Dr. Silence regarded us both intently for a moment before he replied. I think he weighed in his mind whether to tell us now, or when the investigation was absolutely complete.

"The mummy," he said softly, after a moment; "the mummy that your brother took from its resting-place of centuries, and brought home—here."

Colonel Wragge dropped down upon the nearest chair, hanging breathlessly on every word. He was far too amazed for speech.

"The mummy of some important person—a priest most likely—protected from disturbance and desecration by the ceremonial magic of the time. For they understood how to attach to the mummy, to lock up with it in the tomb, an elemental force that would direct itself even after ages upon any one who dared to molest it. In this case it was an elemental of fire."

Dr. Silence crossed the floor and turned out the lamps one by one. He had nothing more to say for the moment. Following his example, I folded the table together and took up the chairs, and our host, still dazed and silent, mechanically obeyed him and moved to the door.

We removed all traces of the experiment, taking the empty bowl back to the house concealed beneath an ulster.

The air was cool and fragrant as we walked to the house, the stars beginning to fade overhead and a fresh wind of early morning blowing up out of the east where the sky was already hinting of the coming day. It was after five o'clock.

Stealthily we entered the front hall and locked the door, and as we went on tiptoe upstairs to our rooms, the Colonel, peering at us over his candle as he nodded good-night, whispered that if we were ready the digging should be begun that very day.

Then I saw him steal along to his sister's room and disappear.

4

BUT NOT EVEN THE mysterious references to the mummy, or the prospect of a revelation by digging, were able to hinder the reaction that followed the intense excitement of the past twelve hours, and I slept the sleep of the dead, dreamless and undisturbed. A touch on the shoulder woke me, and I saw Dr. Silence standing beside the bed, dressed to go out.

"Come," he said, "it's tea-time. You've slept the best part of a dozen hours."

I sprang up and made a hurried toilet, while my companion sat and talked. He looked fresh and rested, and his manner was even quieter than usual.

"Colonel Wragge has provided spades and pick-axes. We're going out to unearth this mummy at once," he said; "and there's no reason we should not get away by the morning train."

"I'm ready to go tonight, if you are," I said honestly.

But Dr. Silence shook his head. "I must see this through to the end," he said gravely, and in a tone that made me think he still anticipated serious things, perhaps. He went on talking while I dressed.

"This case is really typical of all stories of mummy-haunting, and none of them are cases to trifle with," he explained, "for the mummies of important people—kings, priests, magicians—were laid away with profoundly significant ceremonial, and were very effectively protected, as you have seen, against desecration, and especially against destruction.

"The general belief," he went on, anticipating my questions, "held, of course, that the perpetuity of the mummy guaranteed that of its Ka,—the owner's spirit,—but it is not improbable that the magical embalming was also used to retard reincarnation, the preservation of the body preventing the return of the spirit to the toil and discipline of earth-life; and, in any case, they knew how to attach powerful guardian-forces to keep off trespassers. And any one who dared to remove the mummy, or especially to unwind it well," he added, with meaning, "you have seen—and you *will* see."

I caught his face in the mirror while I struggled with my collar. It was deeply serious. There could be no question that he spoke of what he believed and knew.

"The traveller-brother who brought it here must have been haunted, too," he continued, "for he tried to banish it by burial in the wood, making a magic circle to enclose it. Something of genuine ceremonial he must have known, for the stars the man saw were of course the remains of

the still flaming pentagrams he traced at intervals in the circle. Only he did not know enough, or possibly was ignorant that the mummy's guardian was a fire-force. Fire cannot be enclosed by fire, though, as you saw, it can be released by it."

"Then that awful figure in the laundry?" I asked, thrilled to find him so communicative.

"Undoubtedly the actual Ka of the mummy operating always behind its agent, the elemental, and most likely thousands of years old."

"And Miss Wragge—?" I ventured once more.

"Ah, Miss Wragge," he repeated with increased gravity, "Miss Wragge—"

A knock at the door brought a servant with word that tea was ready, and the Colonel had sent to ask if we were coming down. The thread was broken. Dr. Silence moved to the door and signed to me to follow. But his manner told me that in any case no real answer would have been forthcoming to my question.

"And the place to dig in" I asked, unable to restrain my curiosity, "will you find it by some process of divination or—"

He paused at the door and looked back at me, and with that he left me to finish my dressing.

It was growing dark when the three of us silently made our way to the Twelve Acre Plantation; the sky was overcast, and a black wind came out of the east. Gloom hung about the old house and the air seemed full of sighings. We found the tools ready laid at the edge of the wood, and each shouldering his piece, we followed our leader at once in among the trees. We went straight forward for some twenty yards and then stopped. At his feet lay the blackened circle of one of the burned places. It was just discernible against the surrounding white grass.

"There are three of these," he said, "and they all lie in a line with one another. Any one of them will tap the tunnel that connects the laundry—the former Museum—with the chamber where the mummy now lies buried."

He at once cleared away the burnt grass and began to dig; we all began to dig. While I used the pick, the others shovelled vigorously No one spoke. Colonel Wragge worked the hardest of the three. The soil was light and sandy, and there were only a few snake-like roots and occasional loose stones to delay us. The pick made short work of these. And meanwhile the darkness settled about us and the biting wind swept roaring through the trees overhead.

Then, quite suddenly, without a cry, Colonel Wragge disappered up to his neck.

"The tunnel!" cried the doctor, helping to drag him out, red, breathless, and covered with sand and perspiration. "Now, let me lead the way." And he slipped down nimbly into the hole, so that a moment later we heard his voice, muffled by sand and distance, rising up to us.

"Hubbard, you come next, and then Colonel Wragge—if he wishes," we heard.

"I'll follow you, of course," he said, looking at me as I scrambled in.

The hole was bigger now, and I got down on all fours in a channel not much bigger than a large sewer-pipe and found myself in total darkness. A minute later a heavy thud, followed by a cataract of loose sand, announced the arrival of the Colonel.

"Catch hold of my heel," called Dr. Silence, "and Colonel Wragge can take yours."

In this slow, laborious fashion we wormed our way along a tunnel that had been roughly dug out of the shifting sand, and was shored up clumsily by means of wooden pillars and posts. Any moment, it seemed to me, we might be buried alive. We could not see an inch before our eyes, but had to grope our way feeling the pillars and the walls. It was difficult to breathe, and the Colonel behind me made but slow progress, for the cramped position of our bodies was very severe.

We had travelled in this way for ten minutes, and gone perhaps as much as ten yards, when I lost my grasp of the doctor's heel.

"Ah!" I heard his voice, sounding above me somewhere. He was standing up in a clear space, and the next moment I was standing beside him. Colonel Wragge came heavily after, and he too rose up and stood. Then Dr. Silence produced his candles and we heard preparations for striking matches.

Yet even before there was a light, an indefiniable sensation of awe came over us all. In this hole in the sand, some three feet under ground, we stood side by side, cramped and huddled, struck suddenly with an overwhelming apprehension of something ancient, something formidable, something incalculably wonderful, that touched in each one of us a sense of the sublime and the terrible even before we could see an inch before our faces. I know not how to express in language this singular emotion that caught us here in utter darkness, touching no sense directly, it seemed, yet with the recognition that before us in the blackness of this underground night there lay something that was mighty with the mightiness of long past ages.

I felt Colonel Wragge press in closely to my side, and I understood the

pressure and welcomed it. No human touch, to me at least, has ever been more eloquent.

The the match flared, a thousand shadows fled on black wings, and I saw John Silence fumbling with the candle, his face lit up grotesquely by the flickering light below it.

I had dreaded this light, yet when it came there was apparently nothing to explain the profound sensations of dread that preceded it. We stood in a small vaulted chamber in the sand, the sides and roof shored with bars of wood, and the ground laid roughly, with what seemed to be tiles. It was six feet high, so that we could all stand comfortably, and may have been ten feet long by eight feet wide. Upon the wooden pillars at the side I saw that Egyptian hieroglyphics had been rudely traced by burning.

Dr. Silence lit three candles and handed one to each of us. He placed a fourth in the sand against the wall on his right, and another to mark the entrance to the tunnel. We stood and stared about us, instinctively holding our breath.

"Empty, by God!" exclaimed Colonel Wragge. His voice trembled with excitement. And then, as his eyes rested on the ground, he added, "And footsteps—look—footsteps in the sand!"

Dr. Silence said nothing. He stooped down and began to make a search of the chamber, and as he moved, my eyes followed his crouching figure and noted the queer distorted shadows that poured over the walls and ceiling after him. Here and there thin trickles of loose sand ran fizzing down the sides. The atmosphere, heavily charged with faint yet pungent odours, lay utterly still, and the flames of the candles might have been painted on the air for all the movement they betrayed.

And, as I watched, it was almost necessary to persuade myself forcibly that I was only standing upright with difficulty in this little sand-hole of a modern garden in the south of England, for it seemed to me that I stood, as in vision, at the entrance of some vast rock-hewn Temple far, far down the river of Time. The illusion was powerful, and persisted. Granite columns, that rose to heaven, piled themselves about me, majestically uprearing, and a roof like the sky itself spread above a line of colossal figures that moved in shadowy procession along endless and stupendous aisles. This huge and splendid fantasy, borne I knew not whence, possessed me so vividly that I was actually obliged to concentrate my attention upon the small stooping figure of the doctor, as he groped about the walls, in order to keep the eye of imagination on the scene before me.

But the limited space rendered a long search out of the question, and his footsteps, instead of shuffling through loose sand, presently struck

something of a different quality that gave forth a hollow and resounding echo. He stooped to examine more closely.

He was standing exactly in the centre of the little chamber when this happened, and he at once began scraping away the sand with his feet. In less than a minute a smooth surface became visible—the surface of a wooden covering. The next thing I saw was that he had raised it and was peering down into a space below. Instantly, a strong odour of nitre and bitumen, mingled with the strange perfume of unknown and powdered aromatics, rose up from the uncovered space and filled the vault, stinging the throat and making the eyes water and smart.

"The mummy!" whispered Dr. Silence, looking up into our faces over his candle; and as he said the word I felt the soldier lurch against me, and heard his breathing in my very ear.

"The mummy!" he repeated under his breath, as we pressed forward to look.

It is difficult to say exactly why the sight should have stirred in me so prodigious an emotion of wonder and veneration, for I have had not a little to do with mummies, have unwound scores of them, and even experimented magically with not a few. But there was something in the sight of that grey and silent figure, lying in its modern box of lead and wood at the bottom of this sandy grave, swathed in the bandages of centuries and wrapped in the perfumed linen that the priests of Egypt had prayed over with their mighty enchantments thousands of years before—something in the sight of it lying there and breathing its own spice-laden atmosphere even in the darkness of its exile in this remote land, something that pierced to the very core of my being and touched that root of awe which slumbers in every man near the birth of tears and the passion of true worship.

I remember turning quickly from the Colonel, lest he should see my emotion, yet fail to understand its cause, turn and clutch John Silence by the arm, and then fall trembling to see that he, too, had lowered his head and was hiding his face in his hands.

A kind of whirling storm came over me, rising out of I know not what utter deeps of memory, and in a whiteness of vision I heard the magical old chauntings from the Book of the Dead, and saw the Gods pass by in dim procession, the mighty, immemorial Beings who were yet themselves only the personified attributes of the true Gods, the God with the Eyes of Fire, the God with the Face of Smoke. I saw again Anubis, the dog-faced deity, and the children of Horus, eternal watcher of the ages, as they

swathed Osiris, the first mummy of the world, in the scented and mystic bands, and I tasted again something of the ecstasy of the justified soul as it embarked in the golden Boat of Ra, and journeyed onwards to rest in the fields of the blessed.

And then, as Dr. Silence, with infinite reverence, stooped and touched the still face, so dreadfully staring with its painted eyes, there rose again to our nostrils wave upon wave of this perfume of thousands of years, and time fled backwards like a thing of naught, showing me in haunted panorama the most wonderful dream of the whole world.

A gentle hissing became audible in the air, and the doctor moved quickly backwards. It came close to our faces and then seemed to play about the walls and ceiling.

"The last of the Fire—still waiting for its full accomplishment," he muttered; but I heard both words and hissing as things far away, for I was still busy with the journey of the soul through the Seven Halls of Death, listening for echoes of the grandest ritual ever known to men.

The earthen plates covered with hieroglyphics still lay beside the mummy, and round it, carefully arranged at the points of the compass, stood the four jars with the heads of the hawk, the jackal, the cynocephalus, and man, the jars in which were placed the hair, the nail parings, the heart, and other special portions of the body. Even the amulets, the mirror, the blue clay statues of the Ka, and the lamp with seven wicks were still there. Only the sacred scarabaeus was missing.

"Not only has it been torn from its ancient resting-place," I heard Dr. Silence saying in a solemn voice as he looked at Colonel Wragge with fixed gaze, "but it has been partially unwound,"—he pointed to the wrappings of the beast,—"and—the scarabaeus has been removed from the throat."

The hissing, that was like the hissing of an invisible flame, had ceased; only from time to time we heard it as though it passed backwards and forwards in the tunnel; and we stood looking into each other's faces without speaking.

Presently Colonel Wragge made a great effort and braced himself. I heard the sound catch in his throat before the words actually became audible.

"My sister," he said, very low. And then there followed a long pause, broken at length by John Silence.

"It must be replaced," he said significantly.

"I knew nothing," the soldier said, forcing himself to speak the words he hated saying. "Absolutely nothing."

"It must be returned," repeated the other, "if it is not now too late. For I fear—I fear—"

Colonel Wragge made a movement of assent with his head. "It shall be," he said.

The place was still as the grave.

I do not know what it was then that made us all three turn round with so sudden a start, for there was no sound audible to my ears, at least.

The doctor was on the point of replacing the lid over the mummy, when he straightened up as if he had been shot.

"There's something coming," said Colonel Wragge under his breath, and the doctor's eyes, peering down the small opening of the tunnel, showed me the true direction.

A distant shuffling noise became distinctly audible coming from a point about halfway down the tunnel we had so laboriously penetrated.

"It's the sand falling in," I said, though I knew it was foolish.

"No," said the Colonel calmly, in a voice that seemed to have the ring of iron, "I've heard it for some time past. It is something alive—and it is coming nearer."

He stared about him with a look of resolution that made his face almost noble. The horror in his heart was overmastering, yet he stood there prepared for anything that might come.

"There's no other way out," John Silence said.

He leaned the lid against the sand, and waited. I knew by the mask-like expression of his face, the pallor, and the steadiness of the eyes, that he anticipated something that might be very terrible—appalling.

The Colonel and myself stood on either side of the opening. I still held my candle and was ashamed of the way it shook, dripping the grease all over me; but the soldier had set his into the sand just behind his feet.

Thoughts of being buried alive, of being smothered like rats in a trap, of being caught and done to death by some invisible and merciless force we could not grapple with, rushed into my mind. Then I thought of fire—of suffocation—of being roasted alive. The perspiration began to pour from my face.

"Steady!" came the voice of Dr. Silence to me through the vault.

For five minutes, that seemed fifty, we stood waiting, looking from each other's faces to the mummy, and from the mummy to the hole, and all the time the shuffling sound, soft and stealthily, came gradually nearer. The tension, for me at least, was very near the breaking point when at last the cause of the disturbance reached the edge. It was hidden for a moment just behind the broken rim of soil. A jet of sand, shaken by the close

vibration, trickled down on to the ground; I had never in my life seen anything fall with such laborious leisure. The next second, uttering a cry of curious quality, it came into view.

And it was far more distressingly horrible than anything I had anticipated.

For the sight of some Egyptian monster, some god of the tombs, or even of some demon of fire, I think I was already half prepared; but when, instead, I saw the white visage of Miss Wragge framed in that round opening of sand, followed by her body crawling on all-fours, her eyes bulging and reflecting the yellow glare of the candles, my first instinct was to turn and run like a frantic animal seeking a way of escape.

But Dr. Silence, who seemed no whit surprised, caught my arm and steadied me, and we both saw the Colonel then drop upon his knees and come thus to a level with his sister. For more than a whole minute, as though struck in stone, the two faces gazed silently at each other: her's, for all the dreadful emotion in it, more like a gargoyle than anything human; and his, white and blank with an expression that was beyond either astonishment or alarm. She looked up; he looked down. It was a picture in a nightmare, and the candle, stuck in the sand close to the hole, threw upon it the glare of impromptu footlights.

Then John Silence moved forward and spoke in a voice that was very low, yet perfectly calm and natural. "I am glad you have come," he said. "You are the one person whose presence at this moment is most required. And I hope that you may yet be in time to appease the anger of the Fire, and to bring peace again to your household, and," he added lower still so that no one heard it but myself, "*safety to yourself.*"

And while her brother stumbled backwards, crushing a candle into the sand in his awkwardness, the old lady crawled farther into the vaulted chamber and slowly rose upon her feet.

At the sight of the wrapped figure of the mummy I was fully prepared to see her scream and faint, but on the contrary, to my complete amazement, she merely bowed her head and dropped quietly upon her knees. Then, after a pause of more than a minute, she raised her eyes to the roof and her lips began to mutter as in prayer. Her right hand, meanwhile, which had been fumbling for some time at her throat, suddenly came away, and before the gaze of all of us she held it out, palm upwards, over the grey and ancient figure outstretched below. And in it we beheld glistening the green jasper of the stolen scarabaeus.

Her brother, leaning heavily against the wall behind, uttered a sound

that was half cry, half exclamation, but John Silence, standing directly in front of her, merely fixed his eyes on her and pointed downwards to the staring face below.

"Replace it," he said sternly, "where it belongs."

Miss Wragge was kneeling at the feet of the mummy when this happened. We three men all had our eyes riveted on what followed. Only the reader who by some remote chance may have witnessed a line of mummies, freshly laid from their tombs upon the sand, slowly stir and bend as the heat of the Egyptian sun warms their ancient bodies into the semblance of life, can form any conception of the ultimate horror we experienced when the silent figure before us moved in its grave of lead and sand. Slowly, before our eyes, it writhed, and, with a faint rustling of the immemorial cerements, rose up, and through sightless and bandaged eyes, stared across the yellow candle-light at the woman who had violated it.

I tried to move—her brother tried to move—but the sand seemed to hold our feet. I tried to cry—her brother tried to cry—but the sand seemed to fill our lungs and throat. We could only stare -and, even so, the sand seemed to rise like a desert storm and cloud our vision....

And when I managed at length to open my eyes again, the mummy was lying once more upon its back, motionless, the shrunken and painted face upturned towards the ceiling, and the old lady had tumbled forward and was lying in the semblance of death with her head and arms upon its crumbling body.

But upon the wrappings of the throat I saw the green jasper of the sacred scarabaeus shining again like a living eye.

Colonel Wragge and the doctor recovered themselves long before I did, and I found myself helping them clumsily and unintelligently to raise the frail body of the old lady, while John Silence carefully replaced the covering over the grave and scraped back the sand with his foot, while he issued brief directions.

I heard his voice as in a dream; but the journey back along that cramped tunnel, weighted by a dead woman, blinded with sand, suffocated with heat, was in no sense a dream. It took us the best part of half an hour to reach the open air. And, even then, we had to wait a considerable time for the appearance of Dr. Silence. We carried her undiscovered into the house and up to her own room.

"The mummy will cause no further disturbance," I heard Dr. Silence say to our host later that evening as we prepared to drive for the night train, "provided always," he added significantly, "that you, and yours, cause *it* no disturbance."

It was in a dream, too, that we left.

"You did not see her face, I know," he said to me as we wrapped our rugs about us in the empty compartment. And when I shook my head, quite unable to explain the instinct that had come to me not to look, he turned towards me, his face pale, and genuinely sad.

"Scorched and blasted," he whispered.

Coming Next Issue

THE MIRACLE AGENT

by Harry Stephen Keeler

* * * * * *

DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS

by Ross Rocklynne

* * * * * *

While no one voted "no" on the question of whether we should adhere to a policy of featuring a novella in each issue, there were sufficient votes either in preference for short stories and novelets, or for alternating between the two policies to justify our settling for occasional alternation. This time we have two novelets which we feel are more suited for *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* than for *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* or *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES.* But be not alarmed, those of you who prefer novellas—we have more of them for subsequent issues!

Inquisitions

OTHER DIMENSIONS, by Clark Ashton Smith; Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin 53583; 1970; 329pp hardcover; $6.50.

Contents: *Marooned in Andromeda, The Amazing Planet, An Adventure in Futurity, The Immeasurable Horror, The Invisible City, The Dimension of Chance, The Metamorphosis of Earth, Phoenix, The Necromantic Tale, The Venus of Azombeii, The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake, The Supernumerary Corpse, The Mandrakes, Thirteen Phantasms, An Offering to the Moon, Monsters in the Night, The Malay Krise, The Ghost of Mohammed Din, The Mahout, The Raja and the Tiger, Something New, The Justice of the Elephant, The Kiss of Zoraida, A Tale of Sir John Maundeville, The Ghoul, Told in the Desert.*

For a discussion of this book, see *The Editor's Page.*

ZOTHIQUE, by Clark Ashton Smith; Edited and with an Introduction by Lin Carter; Ballantine Adult Fantasy series; softcover; 95¢.

Contents: Introduction: *When the World Grows Old,* by Lin Carter, *Zothique* (verse), *Xeethra, Necromancy in Naat, The Empire of the Necromancers, The Master of the Crabs, The Death of Ilalotha, The Weaver in the Vault, The Witchcraft of Ulua, The Charnel God, The Dark Eidolon, Morthylla, The Black Abbot of Puthuum, The Tomb-Spawn The Last Hieroglyph, The Isle of the Torturers, The Garden of Adompha, The Voyage of King Euvoran,* Epilogue: *The Sequence of the Zothique Tales,* by Lin Carter.

For a discussion of this book, see *The Editor's Page.*

PHANTASTES, by George MacDonald; introduction by Lin Carter; Ballantine Adult Fantasy series; softcover; 95¢.

The fantastic novel of adventure and romance in worlds created by the author, says Lin Carter, begins in English with William Morris, whose first novel of this sort, *The Wood Beyond the World,* was published in 1895. But Morris was not entirely the first fantasite, as our present author, George MacDonald wrote two dream fantasies of novel length earlier; the present one is the first of the two, and was originally published in 1858.

It's dream and symbol, taking place in Fairyland, and while there are certainly elements of the mediaeval

romances -knights and monsters and fair ladies and hopeless yearnings and the responsibilities of chivalry - there is a worlds-within-worlds inwardness which I would suspect to be far different, as well as a minimum of action. *Phantastes* moves leisurely, and is not for the reader who wants it socked to him quickly; the impact is slow and accumulative, and not everyone is capable of absorbing it at all—just as everyone is not capable of absorbing fantasy in general at all. It is quite unlike anything else I have ever read, by which I mean that while there are comparisons which I might make, I shall not make them because I consider that they would be more misleading than useful to anyone who has not read the book.

As Lin Carter says in his very fine introduction, "There are many ... details in *Phantastes* that could be illuminated by explanation here—the book cries out to be annotated—passage after passage could be called to the reader's attention having, in this or that detail, anticipated the dream symbolism of Freud, the archetypes of Jung, etc. ..."

If this has aroused your interest, then the odds are in favor of your enjoying *Phantastes.*

THE HIGH PLACE, by James Branch Cabell, with an Author's Note, Introduction by Lin Carter, and illustrations by Franke Pape; Ballantine Adult Fantasy series; softcover; 95¢.

It was around 1937-38, I believe, that I first read Cabell's *Jurgen, The Silver Stallion,* and *Figures of Earth,* in that order, purchasing clean copies of the McBride edition as I was able to raise the money and come into New York City. Fred Pohl had several further volumes in the series, which I believe he would have been willing to loan me, but there were other things I wanted to read more—and besides, how could anything top *Jurgen*?

And, truth to tell, when last year I re-read that trio, this time in the correct order, and heard that *The High Place* would soon follow, it still seemed to me that the rest must be something of a let-down—oh, perhaps enjoyable enough, but really superfluous, etc. So, despite assurances from Jim Blish, Bill Jenkins, and Lin Carter that *The High Place* really is as enjoyable as *Jurgen,* when my copy arrived in the mails, I put it aside. Then I did get to read *The Way of Ecben,* which I found moderately interesting, but not up to the three novels—which did not help matters at all.

Eventually, my sense of duty, doubtless mingled with curiosity and masochism, prevailed, and I set out to read *The High Place.*

Blish, Carter, and Jenkins are entirely right. Perhaps they really said it's better than the first three, once you've read the first three—if they did, they're still right.

Lin Carter notes in his introduction that "Cabell's basic theme is to demonstrate, in the life of Dom Manuel (the hero of *Figures of Earth*) and in the lives of his descendants, what Cabell sees as the three central attitudes towards life. These three different attitudes he calls the chivalrous, the gallant, and the poetic."

The poetic attitude is one that sees everything in life as the raw material for art, existing only for the purpose of being transformed by the poet into a work of art; therefore he is really rather indifferent about what happens to him so far as achieving his dreams are concerned. Comedy and tragedy, love fulfilled or love denied—all is good material and he can use it.

The chivalrous attitude is one which depends upon service—whether to serve God, one's lady, one's king or country, or whatever. "Your proponent of chivalry is, at least in his own eyes, the child of his god, and he goes about the world upon his Father's business, as his

Father's representative in an always alien and not entirely perfect world."

The gallant view is essentially realistic, which means that it is "tolerant, amused, ironic, and, on the whole, accepts things more or less as they are and tries to make the best of them." Such a figure was *Jurgen*.

Unfortunately, his descendant, Florian de Puysage, in the year 1698, became a chivalrous person—exactly the least qualified to go to the High Place and bring back beauty and holiness into his life. Jurgen had had opportunities to encounter these things, too, and refrained from drawing back a curtain and gazing upon Helen of Troy. But Florian, at the age of ten, gazed upon sleeping beauty in an enchanted castle, and the effect was that he was thereafter unable to care for any other woman wholeheartedly. So at the age of thirty-six, having buried four wives (necessary; dead, you know), and on his way to marry a fifth, he turns aside, making a deal with a certain person, and proceeds to the monster-guarded High Place. Needless to say he overcomes the guards, wakens the castle and wins the princess.

Do they live happily ever after?

By no means. And that is the bulk of this ever-fantastic tale, which is in some ways similar to, but in all important ways freshly different from the earlier novels that have been revived by Ballantine. (And I might add, Avon has re-issued *Jurgen*.)

There is another fascinating connection with the novel mentioned above: it was regarded as obscene. Cabell says in his "author's note": "... I find Mr. R. G. Kirk of Santa Monica, California, lamenting my 'stinking filth and vileness' side by side with Mr. E. E. Robinson's petition—as despatched heavenward, via the columns of Book Chat, from Pensacola, Florida,— never to be besmirched with the fancies of a distorted brain such as Cabell's.' The New York Tribune hopefully suggested, in an editorial, that the then world-famous Leopold-Loeb murder had been prompted by a reading of 'The High Place.' "

Yes, indeed; it is fully as immoral, sacrilegious, and obscene as *Jurgen*, and fully as hilarious—in fact, I'd say more so. My only note of caution is that if you have read any of the other three novels noted above, and did not find them to your taste, then the odds are that you will not care for this one, either—it has the same undertaste. If you enjoyed any of the others, then it's worth trying this one. And if you've never read Cabell, you can make a fine start here.

THIRTY YEARS OF ARKHAM HOUSE (1939-1969), by August Derleth; Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin 53583; 1970/; hardcover; 99pp plus six pages of photos; $3.50.

For the collector and bibliophile, this presents the material that appeared in the earlier *Twenty Years of Arkham House*, and brings it up to date, in a more permanent format and in the artistic, tasteful style of the rest of the AH line. The photos are a welcome addition, and include some you may not have seen before (I hadn't), such as Henry S. Whitehead, in ecclesiastical vestments, William Hope Hodgson, Colin Wilson, H. Russell Wakefield, Lord Dunsany, and a *smiling* Clark Ashton Smith! (Tis very roguish indeed he looks.)

If, then, you would like to have a complete breakdown of the contents of every book published by Arkham House, Mycroft & Moran & Stanton & Lee for these full past 30 years, you won't find it outside of this volume; and it would be best to take action now if you're

interested, as only 2000 copies were printed.

DRAGONS, ELVES, and HEROES, edited by Lin Carter; Ballantine Adult Fantasy series (softcover); 277pp; 95¢.

Contents: *Introduction: "Over the Hills and Far Away"*, by Lin Carter; *The Ogre*, by Norma Lorre Goodrich (from *Beowulf*); *The High History of the Sword Gram*, by William Morris (from *The Volsunga Saga*); *Manawyddan Son of the Boundless*, by Kenneth Morris (from *The Mabinogion*); *Puck's Song*, by Rudyard Kipling; *Barrow-Wight*, by S. Baring-Gould (from *The Grettir Saga*); *Fingal at the Seige of Carric-Thura*, by James MacPherson (from *The Poems of Ossian*); *The Sword of Avalon*, by Sir Thomas Mallory (from *Le Morte d'Arthur*); *Tom O'Bedlam's Song*, Anonymous; *The Last Giant of the Elder Age*, by Isabel Florence Hapgood (from *The Kiev Cycle*); *The Lost Words of Power*, by John Martin Crawford (from *The Kalevala*); *Wonderful Things Beyond Cathay*, by Arthur Layard (from *Maundeville's Travels*); *Prospero Evokes the Air Spirits*, by William Shakespeare; *The Lords of Faerie*, by Edmund Spenser (from *The Faerie Queen*); *Tales of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, by Charles Swan and Wynnard Hooper (from *The Gesta Romanorum*); *The Magical Palace of Darkness*, by Francisco de Moraes (from *Palmerin of England*); *Rustum Against the City of Demons*, by Lin Carter (from *The Shah-Namah*); *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, by Robert Browning; *The Princess of Babylon*, by Voltaire; *The Horns of Elfland*, by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

The "by" names here are, of course, the names of translators (or adapters from Old or Middle English into the scribe's contemporary tongue), except in a few instances, such as Shakespeare, Kipling, Browning, etc.

I have never been drawn, heretofore, to collections of snippets from the great works of any sort, and I'm not sure that this collection has entirely converted me; however, I cheerfully acknowledge this as a delightful exception. Little of this material is available complete in contemporary English at non-collector's prices. Many of us have heard of much of it, but never had a chance so much as to sample it before. Lin Carter has done us an excellent service, and if any of these samples lead to you seek a complete work, even at the cost (in time as well as money) of obtaining one of these long out-of-print volumes the editor has used, then this may be all to the good. Or perhaps you may be lead to read some of these works that are still in print in hard or soft covers.

Both the general introduction and the introductions to the several items are interesting and well-done. Particularly interesting here (to me) is the selection from *The Poems of Ossian*, which is one of the great hoaxes in literature—but nonetheless a very fine work in its own right, if this sample can be considered representative. And I do believe that I'll want to hunt down *Maundeville's Travels* in Middle English, as well as see if I can find more of the *The Gesta Romanorum*, to list but two items of particular fascination. Of course, Voltaire remains among my all-time favorite authors of fantasy, and my one quarrel with Lin Carter is concerning the worth of *Candide*. By comparison to the fantasies, I'll grant that it might seem a bit prosaic, but in the translation of it I last read, many years back, I'd hardly accept the verdict of "dreary." The author's wit and irony was working full steam, despite the *ad hoc* motivation for his writing the tale.

If, as was the case with me, this is largely a heretofore unexplored territory, by all means try this

(Turn to Page 83)

MY FAVORITE MURDER

BY AMBROSE BIERCE

Whether AMBROSE BIERCE might justly be called an American Dean Swift is something for other (and more academic) heads than mine to puzzle over, but my own feeling is that the comparison is not inept. Gruesome crimes have been committed and discovered, and the culprits brought to trial where the public heard the details in mingled horror, indignation, fascination, and perhaps a little admiration. As a newspaperman, the misanthropic Bierce was all too aware of ubiquitous human hypocrisy, and his wit was no less sharp than that of his Irish predecessor. In any event, this tale ranks high in the accounts of truly artistic atrocity.

HAVING MURDERED MY MOTHER under circumstances of singular atrocity, I was arrested and put upon my trial, which lasted seven years. In charging the jury, the judge of the Court of Acquittal remarked that it was one of the most ghastly crimes that he had ever been called upon to explain away.

At this, my attorney rose and said:

"May it please your Honor, crimes are ghastly or agreeable only by comparison. If you were familiar with the details of my client's previous murder of his uncle you would discern in his later offense (if offense it may be called) something in the nature of tender forbearance and filial consideration for the feelings of the victim. The appalling ferocity of the

former assassination was indeed inconsistent with any hypothesis but that of guilt; and had it not been for the fact that the honorable judge before whom he was tried was the president of a life insurance company that took risks on hanging, and in which my client held a policy, it is hard to see how he could decently have been acquitted. If your Honor would like to hear about it for instruction and guidance of your Honor's mind, this unfortunate man, my client, will consent to give himself the pain of relating it under oath."

The district attorney said: "Your Honor, I object. Such a statement would be in the nature of evidence, and the testimony in this case is closed. The prisoner's statement should have been introduced three years ago, in the spring of 1881."

"In a statutory sense," said the judge, "you are right, and in the Court of Objections and Technicalities you would get a ruling in your favor. But not in a Court of Acquittal. The objection is overruled."

"I except," said the district attorney.

"You cannot do that," the judge said. "I must remind you that in order to take an exception you must first get this case transferred for a time to the Court of Exceptions on a formal motion duly supported by affidavits. A motion to that effect by your predecessor in office was denied by me during the first year of this trial. Mr. Clerk, swear the prisoner."

The customary oath having been administered, I made the following statement, which impressed the judge with so strong a sense of the comparative triviality of the offense for which I was on trial that he made no further search for mitigating circumstances, but simply instructed the jury to acquit, and I left the court, without a stain upon my reputation:

"I was born in 1856 in Kalamakee, Mich., of honest and reputable parents, one of whom Heaven has mercifully spared to comfort me in my later years. In 1867 the family came to California and settled near Nigger Head, where my father opened a road agency and prospered beyond the dreams of avarice. He was a reticent, saturnine man then, though his increasing years have now somewhat relaxed the austerity of his disposition, and I believe that nothing but his memory of the sad event for which I am now on trial prevents him from manifesting a genuine hilarity.

"Four years after we had set up the road agency an itinerant preacher came along, and having no other way to pay for the night's lodging that we gave him, favored us with an exhortation of such power that, praise God, we were all converted to religion. My father at once sent for his brother, the Hon. William Ridley of Stockton, and on his arrival turned over the agency to him, charging him nothing for the franchise nor plant—the latter

consisting of a Winchester rifle, a sawed-off shotgun, and an assortment of masks made out of flour sacks. The family then moved to Ghost Rock and opened a dance house. It was called 'The Saints' Rest Hurdy-Gurdy,' and the proceedings each night began with prayer. It was there that my now sainted mother, by her grace in the dance, acquired the *sobriquet* of 'The Bucking Walrus.'

"In the fall of '75 I had occasion to visit Coyote, on the road to Mahala, and took the stage at Ghost Rock. There were four other passengers. About three miles beyond Nigger Head, persons whom I identified as my Uncle William and his two sons held up the stage. Finding nothing in the express box, they went through the passengers. I acted a most honorable part in the affair, placing myself in line with the others, holding up my hands and permitting myself to be deprived of forty dollars and a gold watch. From my behavior no one could have suspected that I knew the gentlemen who gave the entertainment. A few days later, when I went to Nigger Head and asked for the return of my money and watch my uncle and cousins swore they knew nothing of the matter, and they affected a belief that my father and I had done the job ourselves in dishonest violation of commercial good faith. Uncle William even threatened to retaliate by starting an opposition dance house at Ghost Rock. As 'The Saints' Rest' had become rather unpopular, I saw that this would assuredly ruin it and prove a paying enterprise, so I told my uncle that I was willing to overlook the past if he would take me into the scheme and keep the partnership a secret from my father. This fair offer he rejected, and I then perceived that it would be better and more satisfactory if he were dead.

"My plans to that end were soon perfected, and communicating them to my dear parents I had the gratification of receiving their approval. My father said he was proud of me, and my mother promised that although her religion forbade her to assist in taking human life I should have the advantage of her prayers for my success. As a preliminary measure looking to my security in case of detection I made an application for membership in that powerful order, the Knights of Murder, and in due course was received as a member of the Ghost Rock commandery. On the day that my probation ended I was for the first time permitted to inspect the records of the order and learn who belonged to it—all the rites of initiation having been conducted in masks. Fancy my delight when, in looking over the roll of membership, I found the third name to be that of my uncle, who indeed was junior vice-chancellor of the order! Here was an opportunity exceeding my wildest dreams—to murder I could add

insubordination and treachery. It was what my good mother would have called 'a special Providence.'

"At about this time something occurred which caused my cup of joy already full, to overflow on all sides, a circular cataract of bliss. Three men, strangers in that locality, were arrested for the stage robbery in which I had lost my money and watch. They were brought to trial and, despite my efforts to clear them and fasten the guilt upon three of the most respectable and worthy citizens of Ghost Rock, convicted on the clearest proof. The murder would now be as wanton and reasonless as I could wish.

"One morning I shouldered my Winchester rifle, and going over to my uncle's house, near Nigger Head, asked my Aunt Mary, his wife, if he were at home, adding that I had come to kill him. My aunt replied with her peculiar smile that so many gentlemen called on that errand and were afterward carried away without having performed it that I must excuse her for doubting my good faith in the matter. She said I did not look as if I would kill anybody, so, as a proof of good faith I leveled my rifle and wounded a Chinaman who happened to be passing the house. She said she knew whole families that could do a thing of that kind, but Bill Ridley was a horse of another color. She said, however, that I would find him over on the other side of the creek in the sheep lot; and she added that she hoped the best man would win.

"My Aunt Mary was one of the most fair-minded women that I have ever met.

"I found my uncle down on his knees engaged in skinning a sheep. Seeing that he had neither gun nor pistol handy I had not the heart to shoot him, so I approached him, greeted him pleasantly and struck him a powerful blow on the head with the butt of my rifle. I have a very good delivery and Uncle William lay down on his side, then rolled over on his back, spread out his fingers and shivered. Before he could recover the use of his limbs I seized the knife that he had been using and cut his hamstrings. You know, doubtless, that when you sever the *tendo Achillis* the patient has no further use of his leg; it is just the same as if he had no leg. Well, I parted them both, and when he revived he was at my service. As soon as he comprehended the situation, he said:

" 'Samuel, you have got the drop on me and can afford to be generous. I have only one thing to ask of you, and that is that you carry me to the house and finish me in the bosom of my family.'

"I told him I thought that a pretty reasonable request and I would do so if he would let me put him into a wheat sack; he would be easier to

carry that way and if we were seen by the neighbors *en route* it would cause less remark. He agreed to that, and going to the barn I got a sack. This, however, did not fit him: it was too short and much wider than he; so I bent his legs, forced his knees up against his breast and got him into it that way, tying the sack above his head. He was a heavy man and I had all that I could do to get him on my back, but I staggered along for some distance until I came to a swing that some of the children had suspended to the branch of an oak. Here I laid him down and sat upon him to rest, and the sight of the rope gave me a happy inspiration. In twenty minutes my uncle, still in the sack, swung free to the sport of the wind.

"I had taken down the rope, tied one end tightly about the mouth of the bag, thrown the other across the limb and hauled him up about five feet from the ground. Fastening the other end of the rope also about the mouth of the sack, I had the satisfaction to see my uncle converted into a large, fine pendulum. I must add that he was not himself entirely aware of the nature of the change that he had undergone in his relation to the exterior world, though in justice to a good man's memory I ought to say that I do not think he would in any case have wasted much of my time in vain remonstrance.

"Uncle William had a ram that was famous in all that region as a fighter. It was in a state of chronic constitutional indignation. Some deep disappointment in early life had soured its disposition and it had declared war upon the whole world. To say that it would butt anything accessible is but faintly to express the nature and scope of its military activity: the universe was its antagonist; its method that of a projectile. It fought like the angels and devils, in mid-air, cleaving the atmosphere like a bird, describing a parabolic curve and descending upon its victim at just the exact angle of incidence to make the most of its velocity and weight. Its momentum, calculated in foot-tons, was something incredible. It had been seen to destroy a four year old bull by a single impact upon the animal's gnarly forehad. No stone wall had ever been known to resist its downward swoop; there were no trees tough enough to stay it; it would splinter them into matchwood and defile their leafy honors in the dust. This irascible and implacable brute—this incarnate thunderbolt—this monster of the upper deep, I had seen reposing in the shade of an adjacent tree, dreaming dreams of conquest and glory. It was with a view to summoning it forth to the field of honor that I suspended its master in the manner described.

"Having completed my preparations, I imparted to the avuncular pendulum a gentle oscillation, and retiring to cover behind a contiguous rock, lifted up my voice in a long rasping cry whose diminishing final note

was drowned in a noise like that of a swearing cat, which emanated from the sack. Instantly that formidable sheep was upon its feet and had taken in the military situation at a glance. In a few moments it had approached, stamping, to within fifty yards of the swinging foeman, who, now retreating and anon advancing, seemed to invite the fray. Suddenly I saw the beast's head drop earthward as if depressed by the weight of its enormous horns; then a dim, white, wavy streak of sheep prolonged itself from that spot in a generally horizontal direction to within about four yards of a point immediately beneath the enemy. There it struck sharply upward, and before it had faded from my gaze at the place whence it had set out I heard a horrid thump and a piercing scream, and my poor uncle shot forward, with a slack rope higher than the limb to which he was attached. Here the rope tautened with a jerk, arresting his flight, and back he swung in a breathless curve to the other end of his arc. The ram had fallen, a heap of indistinguishable legs, wool and horns, but pulling itself together and dodging as its antagonist swept downward it retired at random, alternately shaking its head and stamping its fore-feet. When it had backed about the same distance as that from which it had delivered the assault it paused again, bowed its head as if in prayer for victory and again shot forward, dimly visible as before—a prolonging white streak with monstrous undulations, ending with a sharp ascension. Its course this time was at a right angle to its former one, and its impatience so great that it struck the enemy before he had nearly reached the lowest point of his arc. In consequence he went flying round and round in a horizontal circle whose radius was about equal to half the length of the rope, which I forgot to say was nearly twenty feet long. His shrieks, *crescendo* in approach and *diminuendo* in recession, made the rapidity of his revolution more obvious to the ear than to the eye. He had evidently not yet been struck in a vital spot. His posture in the sack and the distance from the ground at which he hung compelled the ram to operate upon his lower extremities and the end of his back. Like a plant that had stuck its root into some poisonous mineral, my poor uncle was dying slowly upward.

"After delivering its second blow the ram had not again retired. The fever of battle burned hot in its heart; its brain was intoxicated with the wine of strife. Like a pugilist who in his rage forgets his skill and fights ineffectively at half-arm's length, the angry beast endeavored to reach its fleeting foe by awkward vertical leaps as he passed overhead, sometimes, indeed, succeeding in striking him feebly, but more frequently overthrown by its own misguided eagerness. But as the impetus was exhausted and the

man's circles narrowed in scope and diminished in speed, bringing him nearer to the ground, these tactics produced better results, eliciting a superior quality of screams, which I greatly enjoyed.

"Suddenly, as if the bugles had sung truce, the ram suspended hostilities and walked away, thoughtfully wrinkling and smoothing its great aquiline nose, and occasionally cropping a bunch of grass and slowly munching it. It seemed to have tired of war's alarms and resolved to beat the sword into a plowshare and cultivate the arts of peace. Steadily it held its course away from the field of fame until it had gained a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile. There it stopped and stood with its rear to the foe, chewing its cud and apparently half asleep. I observed, however, an occasional slight turn of its head, as if its apathy were more affected than real.

"Meantime Uncle William's shrieks had abated with his motion, and nothing was heard from him but long, low moans, and at long intervals my name, uttered in pleading tones exceedingly grateful to my ear. Evidently the man had not the faintest notion of what was being done to him, and was inexpressibly terrified. When Death comes cloaked in mystery he is terrible indeed. Little by little my uncle's oscillations diminished, and finally he hung motionless. I went to him and was about to give him the *coup de grace*, when I heard and felt a succession of smart shocks which shook the ground like a series of light earthquakes, and turning in the direction of the ram, saw a long cloud of dust approaching me with inconceivable rapidity and alarming effect! At a distance of some thirty yards away it stopped short, and from the near end of it rose into the air what I at first thought a great white bird. Its ascent was so smooth and easy and regular that I could not realize its extraordinary celerity, and was lost in admiration of its grace. To this day the impression remains that it was a slow, deliberate movement, the ram—for it was that animal—being upborne by some power other than its own impetus, and supported through the successive stages of its flight with infinite tenderness and care. My eyes followed its progress through the air with unspeakable pleasure, all the greater by contrast with my former terror of its approach by land. Onward and upward the noble animal sailed, its head bent down almost between its knees, its fore-feet thrown back, its hinder legs trailing to rear like the legs of a soaring heron.

"At a height of forty or fifty feet, as fond recollection presents it to view, it attained its zenith and appeared to remain an instant stationary; then, tilting suddenly forward without altering the relative position of its parts, it shot downward on a steeper and steeper course with augmenting

velocity, passed immediately above me with a noise like the rush of a cannon shot and struck my poor uncle almost squarely on the top of the head! So frightful was the impact that not only the man's neck was broken, but the rope too; and the body of the deceased, forced against the earth, was crushed to pulp beneath the awful front of that meteoric sheep! The concussion stopped all the clocks between Lone Hand and Dutch Dan's, and Professor Davidson, a distinguished authority in matters seismic, who happened to be in the vicinity, promptly explained that the vibrations were from north to southwest.

"Altogether, I cannot help thinking that in point of artistic atrocity my murder of Uncle William has seldom been excelled."

INQUISITIONS

(Continued from Page 75)

collection. If you're already up with it, then a study of the table of contents should be sufficient to determine whether there is enough still-unknown material in it for you.

THE YOUNG MAGICIANS, edited by Lin Carter; Ballantine Adult Fantasy series (soft-cover); 280pp; 95¢.

Contents: *Introduction: "Diana's Foresters"*, by Lin Carter; *Rapunzel*, by William Morris; *The Sword of Welleran*, by Lord Dunsany; *In Valhalla*, by E. R. Eddison; *The Way of Ecben*, by James Branch Cabell; *The Quest of Iranon*, by H. P. Lovecraft; *The Cats of Ulthar*, by H. P. Lovecraft; *The Maze of Maal Dweb*, by Clark Ashton Smith; *The Whelming of Oom*, by Lin Carter; *Through the Dragon Glass*, by A. Merritt; *The Valley of the Worm*, by Robert E. Howard; *Heldendammerung*, by L. Sprague de Camp; *Cursed be the City*, by Henry Kuttner; *Ka, the Appalling*, by L. Sprague de Camp; *Turjan of Mir*, by Jack Vance; *Narnain Suite*, by C. S. Lewis; *Once Upon a Time*, by J. R. R. Tolkien; *The Dragon's Visit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Azlon* (from *Khymyrium*, a work in progress) by Lin Carter. Appendix: "A Basic Reading List of Modern Heroic Fantasy."

This is a companion volume to *Dragons, Elves, and Heroes*, presenting short tales by the most outstanding practitioners of heroic fantasy (or what some call "sword and sorcery") from William Morris, who can be said to have started it all in the sense of being the first to create wholly imaginary universes in English literature (much of the earlier material was elaborated dream, legend, or fantasied history, or both, but nonetheless, rooted in this world of ours) to J. R. R. Tolkien, who at the age of 78, is happily at work on his second massive trilogy—which, as described, sounds as if it will be somewhat of a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. We find a number of practitioners who become known through the old magazines, such as *WEIRD TALES* and *STRANGE TALES* and later, *UNKNOWN*, as well as those who worked outside the magazine field entirely, or almost so.

(Turn to Page 114)

THE HOLINESS OF AZEDARAC

BY CLARK ASHTON SMITH

This is from CLARK ASHTON SMITH's loosely-connected series of Tales of Averoigne, wherein the order in which you read the individual stories is of no importance at all. We have given readers of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR The Colossus of Ylourgne* from this series (Issue No. 25, January, 1969), and readers of *WEIRD TERROR TALES The Beast of Averoigne* in the first issue. The present tale, neither long nor gruesome, has always been one of my favorites, and I'm grateful to *Lester del Rey* for frequently reminding me of it, and of my intent to use it "some time."

"BY THE RAM WITH A Thousand Ewes! By the Tail of Dagon and the Horns of Derceto!" said Azedarac, as he fingered the tiny pot-bellied vial of vermilion liquid on the table before him. "Something will have to be done with this pestilential Brother Ambrose. I have now learned that he

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was sent to Ximes by the Archbishop of Averoigne for no other purpose than to gather proof of my subterraneous connection with Azazel and the Old Ones. He has spied upon my evocations in the vaults, he has heard the hidden formulae, and beheld the veritable manifestation of Lilit, and even of Iog-Sotot and Sodagui, those demons who are more ancient than the world; and this very morning, an hour agone, he has mounted his white ass for the return journey to Vyones. There are two ways—or, in a sense, there is one way—in which I can avoid the pother and inconvenience of a trial for sorcery: the contents of this vial must be administered to Ambrose before he has reached his journey's end—or, failing this, I myself shall be compelled to make use of a similar medicament."

Jehan Mauvaissoir looked at the vial and then at Azedarac. He was not at all horrified, nor even surprised, by the non-episcopal oaths and the somewhat uncanonical statements which he had just heard from the Bishop of Ximes. He had known the Bishop too long and too intimately, and had rendered him too many services of an unconventional nature, to be surprized at anything. In fact, he had known Azedarac long before the sorcerer had ever dreamt of becoming a prelate, in a phase of his existence that was wholly unsuspected by the people of Ximes; and Azedarac had not troubled to keep many secrets from Jehan at any time.

"I understand," said Jehan. "You can depend upon it that the contents of the vial will be administered. Brother Ambrose will hardly travel

post-haste on that ambling white ass; and he will not reach Vyones before tomorrow noon. There is abundant time to overtake him. Of course, he knows me—at least he knows Jehan Mauvaissoir. . But that can easily be remedied."

Azedarac smiled confidentially. "I leave the affair—and the vial in your hands, Jehan. Of course, no matter what the eventuation, with all the Satanic and pre-Satanic facilities at my disposal, I should be in no great danger from these addlepated bigots. However, I am very comfortably situated here in Ximes; and the lot of a Christian Bishop who lives in the odor of incense and piety, and maintains in the meanwhile a private understanding with the Adversary, is certainly preferable to the mischancy life of a hedge-sorcerer. I do not care to be annoyed or disturbed, or ousted from my sinecure, if such can be avoided.

"May Moloch devour that sanctimonious little milksop of an Ambrose," he went on. "I must be growing old and dull, not to have suspected him before this. It was the horror-stricken and averted look he has been wearing lately that made me think he had peered through the keyhole on the subterranean rites. Then, when I heard he was leaving, I wisely thought to review my library; and I have found that the *Book of Eibon*, which contains the oldest incantations, and the secret, man-forgotten lore of Iog-Sotot and Sodagui, is now missing. As you know, I had replaced the former binding of aboriginal, sub-human skin with the sheep-leather of a Christian missal, and had surrounded the volume with rows of legitimate prayer-books. Ambrose is carrying it away under his robe as proof conclusive that I'm addicted to the Black Arts. No one in Averoigne will be able to read the immemorial Hyperborean script; but the dragon's-blood illuminations and drawings will be enough to damn me."

Master and servant regarded each other for an interval of significant silence. Jehan eyed with profound respect the haughty stature, the grimly lined lineaments, the grizzled tonsure, the odd, ruddy, crescent scar on the pallid brow of Azedarac, and the sultry points of orange-yellow fire that seemed to burn deep down in the chill and liquid ebon of his eyes. Azedarac, in his turn, considered with confidence the vulpine features and discreet, inexpressive air of Jehan, who might have been—and could be, if necessary—anything from a mercer to a cleric.

"It is regrettable," resumed Azedarac, "that any question of my holiness and devotional probity should have been raised among the clergy of Averoigne. But I supposed it was inevitable sooner or later—even though the chief difference between myself and many other ecclesiastics is, that I serve the Devil wittingly and of my own free will, while they do the same

in sanctimonious blindness . . . However, we must do what we can to delay the evil hour of public scandal, and eviction from our neatly feathered nest. Ambrose alone could prove anything to my detriment at present; and you, Jehan, will remove Ambrose to a realm wherein his monkish tattlings will be of small consequence. After that, I shall be doubly vigilant. The next emissary from Vyones, I assure you, will find nothing to report but saintliness and bead-telling."

2

THE THOUGHTS OF BROTHER AMBROSE were sorely troubled, and at variance with the tranquil beauty of the sylvan scene, as he rode onward through the forest of Averoigne between Ximes and Vyones. Horror was nesting in his heart like a knot of malignant vipers; and the evil *Book of Eibon,* that primordial manual of sorcery, seemed to burn beneath his robe like a huge, hot, Satanic sigil pressed against his bosom. Not for the first time, there occurred to him the wish that Clement, the Archbishop, had delegated someone else to investigate the Erebean turpitude of Azedarac. Sojourning for a month in the Bishop's household, Ambrose had learned too much for the peace of mind of any pious cleric, and had seen things that were like a secret blot of shame and terror on the white page of his memory. To find that a Christian prelate could serve the powers of nethermost perdition, could entertain in privity the foulnesses that are older than Asmodai, was abysmally disturbing to his devout soul; and ever since then he had seemed to smell corruption everywhere, and had felt on every side the serpentine encroachment of the dark Adversary.

As he rode on among the somber pines and verdant beeches, he wished also that he were mounted on something swifter than the gentle, milk-white ass appointed for his use by the Archbishop. He was dogged by the shadowy intimation of leering gargoyle faces, of invisible cloven feet, that followed him behind the thronging trees and along the umbrageous meanderings of the road. In the oblique rays, the elongated webs of shadow wrought by the dying afternoon, the forest seemed to attend with bated breath the noisome and furtive passing of innominable things. Nevertheless, Ambrose had met no one for miles; and he had seen neither bird nor beast nor viper in the summer woods.

His thoughts returned with fearful insistence to Azerdarac, who appeared to him as a tall, prodigious Antichrist, uprearing his sable vans and giant figure from out the flaming mire of Abaddon. Again he saw the vaults beneath the Bishop's mansion, wherein he had peered one night on a

scene of infernal terror and loathliness, had beheld the Bishop swathed in the gorgeous, coiling fumes of unholy censers, that mingled in midair with the sulfurous and bituminous vapors of the Pit; and through the vapors had seen the lasciviously swaying limbs, the bellying and dissolving features of foul, enormous entities. . . Recalling them, again he trembled at the pre-Adamite lubriciousness of Lilit, again he shuddered at the trans-galactic horror of the demon Sodagui, and the ultra-dimensional hideousness of that being known as Iog-Sotot to the sorcerers of Averoigne.

How balefully potent and subversive, he thought, were these immemorial devils, who had placed their servant Azedarac in the very bosom of the Church, in a position of high and holy trust. For nine years the evil prelate had held an unchallenged and unsuspected tenure, had befouled the bishopric of Ximes with infidelities that were worse than those of the Paynims. Then, somehow, through anonymous channels, a rumor had reached Clement—a warning whisper that not even the Archbishop had dared to voice aloud; and Ambrose, a young Benedictine monk, the nephew of Clement, had been dispatched to examine privily the festering foulness that threatened the integrity of the Church. Only at that time did any one recall how little was actually known regarding the antecedents of Azedarac; how tenuous were his claims to ecclesiastical preferment, or even to mere priestship; how veiled and doubtful were the steps by which he had attained his office. It was then realized that a formidable wizardry had been at work.

Uneasily, Ambrose wondered if Azedarac has already discovered the removal of the *Book of Eibon* from among the missals contaminated by its blasphemous presence. Even more uneasily, he wondered what Azedarac would do in that event, and how long it would take him to connect the absence of the volume with his visitor's departure.

At this point, the meditations of Ambrose were interrupted by the hard clatter of galloping hoofs that approached from behind. The emergence of a centaur from the oldest wood of paganism would scarcely have startled him to a keener panic; and he peered apprehensively over his shoulder at the nearing horseman. This person, mounted on a fine black steed with opulent trappings, was a bushy-bearded man of obvious consequence; for his gay garments were those of a noble or a courtier. He overtook Ambrose and passed on with a polite nod, seeming to be wholly intent on his own affairs. The monk was immensely reassured, though vaguely troubled for some moments by a feeling that he had seen elsewhere, under circumstances which he was now unable to recall, the narrow eyes and

sharp profile that constrasted so oddly with the bluff beard of the horseman. However, he was comfortably sure that he had never seen the man in Ximes. The rider soon vanished beyond a leafy turn of the arboreal highway. Ambrose returned to the pious horror and apprehensiveness of his former soliloquy.

As he went on, it seemed to him that the sun had gone down with untimely and appalling swiftness. Though the heavens above were innocent of cloud, and the low-lying air was free from vapors, the woods were embrowned by an inexplicable gloom that gathered visibly on all sides. In this gloom, the trunks of the trees were strangely distorted, and the low masses of foliage assumed unnatural and disquieting forms. It appeared to Ambrose that the silence around him was a fragile film through which the raucous rumble and mutter of diabolic voices might break at any moment, even as the foul and sunken driftage that rises anon above the surface of a smoothly flowing river.

With much relief, he remembered that he was not far from a wayside tavern, known as the Inn of Bonne Jouissance. Here, since his journey to Vyones was little more than half completed, he resolved to tarry for the night.

A minute more and he saw the lights of the inn. Before their benign and golden radiance, the equivocal forest shadows that attended him seemed to halt and retire, and he gained the haven of the tavern courtyard with the feeling of one who has barely escaped from an army of goblin perils.

Committing his mount to the care of a stable-servant, Ambrose entered the main room of the inn. Here he was greeted with the deference due to his cloth by the stout and unctuous taverner; and, being assured that the best accommodations of the place were at his disposal, he seated himself at one of several tables where other guests had already gathered to await the evening meal.

Among them, Ambrose recognized the bluff-bearded horseman who had overtaken him in the woods an hour agone. This person was sitting alone, and a little apart. The other guests, a couple of travelling mercers, a notary, and two soldiers, acknowledged the presence of the monk with all due civility; but the horseman arose from his table, and coming over to Ambrose, began immediately to make overtures that were more than those of common courtesy.

"Will you not dine with me, sir monk?" he invited, in a gruff, but ingratiating voice that was perplexingly familiar to Ambrose, and yet, like the wolfish profile, was irrecognizable at the time.

"I am the Sieur des Emaux, from Touraine, at your service," the man went on. "It would seem that we are travelling the same road—possibly to the same destination. Mine is the cathedral city of Vyones. And yours?"

Though he was vaguely perturbed, and even a little suspicious, Ambrose found himself unable to decline the invitation. In reply to the last question, he admitted that he also was on his way to Vyones. He did not altogether like the Sieur des Emaux, whose slitted eyes gave back the candle-light of the inn with a covert glitter, and whose manner was somewhat effusive, not to say fulsome. But there seemed to be no ostensible reason for refusing a courtesy that was doubtless well-meant and genuine. He accompanied his host to their separate table.

"You belong to the Benedictine order, I observe," said the Sieur des Emaux, eyeing the monk with an odd smile that was tinged with furtive irony. "It is an order that I have always admired greatly—a most noble and worthy brotherhood. May I not inquire your name?"

Ambrose gave the requested information with a curious reluctance.

"Well, then, Brother Ambrose," said the Sieur des Emaux, "I suggest that we drink to your health and the prosperity of your order in the red wine of Averoigne while we are waiting for supper to be served. Wine is always welcome, following a long journey, and is no less beneficial before a good meal than after."

Ambrose mumbled an unwilling assent. He could not have told why, but the personality of the man was more and more distasteful to him. He seemed to detect a sinister undertone in the purring voice, to surprize an evil meaning in the low-lidded glance. And all the while his brain was tantalized by intimations of a forgotten memory. Had he seen his interlocutor in Ximes? Was the self-styled Sieur des Emaux a henchman of Azedarac in disguise?

Wine was now ordered by his host, who left the table to confer with the innkeeper for this purpose, and even insisted on paying a visit to the cellar, that he might select a suitable vintage in person. Noting the obeisance paid to the man by the people in the tavern, who addressed him by name, Ambrose felt a certain measure of reassurance. When the taverner, followed by the Sieur des Emaux, returned with two earthen pitchers of wine, he had well-nigh succeeded in dismissing his vague doubts and vaguer fears.

Two large goblets were now placed on the table, and the Sieur des Emaux filled them immediately from one of the pitchers. It seemed to Ambrose that the first of the goblets already contained a small amount of some sanguine fluid, before the wine was poured into it; but he could not

have sworn to this in the dim light, and thought that he must have been mistaken.

"Here are two matchless vintages," said the Sieur des Emaux, indicating the pitchers. "Both are so excellent that I was unable to choose between them; but you, Brother Ambrose, are perhaps capable of deciding their merits with a finer palate than mine."

He pushed one of the filled goblets toward Ambrose. "This is the wine of La Frenaie," he said. "Drink, it will verily transport you from the world by virtue of the mighty fire that slumbers in its heart."

Ambrose took the proffered goblet, and raised it to his lips. The Sieur des Emaux was bending forward above his own wine to inhale its bouquet; and something in his posture was terrifyingly familiar to Ambrose. In a chill flash of horror, his memory told him that the thin, pointed features behind the square beard were dubiously similar to those of Jehan Mauvaissoir, whom he had often seen in the household of Azedarac, and who, as he had reason to believe, was implicated in the Bishop's sorceries. He wondered why he had not placed the resemblance before, and what wizardry had drugged his powers of recollection. Even now he was not sure; but the mere suspicion terrified him as if some deadly serpent had reared its head across the table.

"Drink, Brother Ambrose," urged the Sieur des Emaux, draining his own goblet. "To your welfare and that of all good Benedictines."

Ambrose hesitated. The cold, hypnotic eyes of his interlocutor were upon him, and he was powerless to refuse, in spite of all his apprehensions. Shuddering slightly, with the sense of some irresistible compulsion, and feeling that he might drop dead from the virulent working of a sudden poison, he emptied his goblet.

An instant more, and he felt that his worst fears had been justified. The wine burned like the liquid flames of Phlegeton in his throat and on his lips; it seemed to fill his veins with a hot, infernal quick-silver. Then, all at once, an unbearable cold had inundated his being; an icy whirlwind wrapped him round with coils of roaring air, the chair melted beneath him, and he was falling through endless glacial gulfs. The walls of the inn had flown like receding vapors; the lights went out like stars in the black mist of a marish; and the face of the Sieur des Emaux faded with them on the swirling shadows, even as a bubble that breaks on the milling of midnight waters.

3

IT WAS WITH SOME DIFFICULTY that Ambrose assured himself that

he was not dead. He had seemed to fall eternally, through a gray night that was peopled with ever-changing forms, with blurred unstable masses that dissolved to other masses before they could assume definitude. For a moment, he thought there were walls about him once more; and then he was plunging from terrace to terrace of a world of phantom trees. At whiles, he thought also that there were human faces; but all was doubtful and evanescent, all was drifting smoke and surging shadow.

Abruptly, with no sense of transition or impact, he found that he was no longer falling. The vague fantasmagoria around him had returned to an actual scene—but a scene in which there was no trace of the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, or the Sieur des Emaux.

Ambrose peered about with incredulous eyes on a situation that was truly unbelievable. He was sitting in broad daylight on a large square block of roughly hewn granite. Around him, at a little distance, beyond the open space of a grassy glade, were the lofty pines and spreading beeches of an elder forest, whose boughs were already touched by the gold of the declining sun. Immediately before him, several men were standing.

These men appeared to regard Ambrose with a profound and almost religious amazement. They were bearded and savage of aspect, with white robes of a fashion he had never before seen. Their hair was long and matted, like tangles of black snakes; and their eyes burned with a frenetic fire. Each of them bore in his right hand a rude knife of sharply chiselled stone.

Ambrose wondered if he had died after all, and if these beings were the strange devils of some unlisted hell. In the face of what had happened, and the light of Ambrose's own beliefs, it was a far from unreasonable conjecture. He peered with fearful trepidation at the supposed demons, and began to mumble a prayer to the God who had abandoned him so inexplicably to his spiritual foes. Then he remembered the necromantic powers of Azedarac, and conceived another surmise—that he had been spirited bodily away from the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, and delivered into the hands of those pre-Satanic entities that served the sorcerous Bishop. Becoming convinced of his own physical solidity and integrity, and reflecting that such was scarcely the appropriate condition of a disincarnate soul, and also that the sylvan scene about him was hardly characteristic of the infernal regions, he accepted this as the true explanation. He was still alive, and still on earth, though the circumstances of his situation were more than mysterious, and were fraught with dire, unknowable danger.

The strange beings had maintained an utter silence, as if they were too dumbfounded for speech. Hearing the prayerful murmurs of Ambrose, they seemed to recover from their surprize, and became not only articulate but vociferous. Ambrose could make nothing of their harsh vocables, in which sibilants and aspirates and gutturals were often combined in a manner difficult for the normal human tongue to imitate. However, he caught the word *taranit*, several times repeated, and wondered if it were the name of an especially malevolent demon.

The speech of the weird beings began to assume a sort of rude rhythm, like the intonations of some primordial chant. Two of them stepped forward and seized Ambrose, while the voices of their companions rose in a shrill, triumphant litany.

Scarcely knowing what had happened, and still less what was to follow, Ambrose was flung supine on the granite block, and was held down by one of his captors, while the other raised aloft the keen blade of chiselled flint which he carried. The blade was poised in air above Ambrose's heart, and the monk realized in sudden terror that it would fall with dire velocity and pierce him through before the lapse of another moment.

Then, above the demoniac chanting, which had risen to a mad, malignant frenzy, he heard the sweet and imperious cry of a woman's voice. In the wild confusion of his terror, the words were strange and meaningless to him; but plainly they were understood by his captors, and were taken as an undeniable command. The stone knife was lowered sullenly, and Ambrose was permitted to resume a sitting posture on the flat slab.

His rescuer was standing on the edge of the open glade, in the wide-flung umbrage of an ancient pine. She came forward now; and the white-garmented beings fell back with evident respect before her. She was very tall, with a fearless and regal demeanor, and was gowned in a dark, shimmering blue, like the star-laden blue of nocturnal summer skies. Her hair was knotted in a long golden-brown braid, heavy as the glistening coils of some Eastern serpent. Her eyes were a strange amber, her lips a vermilion touched with the coolness of woodland shadow, and her skin was of alabastrine fairness. Ambrose saw that she was beautiful; but she inspired him with the same awe that he would have felt before a queen, together with something of the fear and consternation which a virtuous young monk would conceive in the perilous presence of an alluring succubus.

"Come with me," she said to Ambrose, in a tongue that his monastic studies enabled him to recognize as an obsolete variant of the French of

Averoigne—a tongue that no man had supposedly spoken for many hundred years. Obediently and in great wonder, he arose and followed her, with no hindrance from his glowering and reluctant captors.

The woman led him to a narrow path that wound sinuously away through the deep forest. In a few moments, the glade, the granite block, and the cluster of white-robed men were lost to sight behind the heavy foliage.

"Who are you?" asked the lady, turning to Ambrose. "You look like one of those crazy missionairies who are beginning to enter Averoigne nowadays. I believe that people call them Christians. The Druids have sacrified so many of them to Taranit, that I marvel at your temerity in coming here."

Ambrose found it difficult to comprehend the archaic phrasing, and the import of her words was so utterly strange and baffling that he felt sure he must have misunderstood her.

"I am Brother Ambrose," he replied, expressing himself slowly and awkwardly in a long-disused dialect. "Of course, I am a Christian; but I confess that I fail to understand you. I have heard of the pagan Druids; but surely they were all driven from Averoigne many centuries ago."

The woman stared at Ambrose, with open amazement and pity. Her brownish-yellow eyes were bright and clear as a mellowed wine.

"Poor little one," she said. "I fear that your dreadful experiences have served to unsettle you. It was fortunate that I came along when I did, and decided to intervene. I seldom interfere with the Druids and their sacrifices; but I saw you sitting on their altar a little while agone, and was struck by your youth and comeliness."

Ambrose felt more and more that he had been made the victim of a most peculiar sorcery; but, even yet, he was far from suspecting the true magnitude of this sorcery. Amid his bemusement and consternation, however, he realized that he owed his life to the singular and lovely woman beside him, and began to stammer out his gratitude.

"You need not thank me," said the lady, with a dulcet smile. "I am Moriamis, the enchantress, and the Druids fear my magic, which is more sovereign and more excellent than theirs, though I use it only for the welfare of men and not for their bale or bane."

The monk was dismayed to learn that his fair rescuer was a sorceress, even though her powers were professedly benignant. The knowledge added to his alarm; but he felt that it would be politic to conceal his emotions in this regard.

"Indeed, I am grateful to you," he protested. "And now, if you can tell me the way to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, which I left not long ago, I shall owe you a further debt."

Moriamis knitted her light brows. "I have never heard of the Inn of Bonne Jouissance. There is no such place in this region."

"But this is the forest of Averoigne, is it not?" inquired the puzzled Ambrose. "And surely we are not far from the road that runs between the town of Ximes and the city of Vyones?"

"I have never heard of Ximes, or Vyones, either," said Moriamis. "Truly, the land is known as Averoigne, and this forest is the great wood of Averoigne, which men have called by that name from primeval years. But there are no towns such as the ones whereof you speak, Brother Ambrose. I fear that you still wander a little in your mind."

Ambrose was aware of a maddening perplexity. "I have been most damnably beguiled," he said, half to himself. "It is the doing of that abominable sorcerer, Azedarac, I am sure."

The woman started as if she had been stung by a wild bee. There was something both eager and severe in the searching gaze that she turned upon Ambrose.

"Azedarac?" she queried. "What do you know of Azedarac? I was once acquainted with some one by that name; and I wonder if it could be the same person. Is he tall and a little gray, with hot, dark eyes, and a proud, half-angry air, and a crescent scar on the brow?"

Greatly mystified, and more troubled than ever, Ambrose admitted the veracity of her description. Realizing that in some unknown way he had stumbled upon the hidden antecedents of the sorcerer, he confided the story of his adventures to Moriamis, hoping that she would reciprocate with further information concerning Azedarac.

The woman listened with the air of one who is much interested but not at all surprised.

"I understand now," she observed, when he had finished. "Anon I shall explain everything that mystifies and troubles you. I think I know this Jehan Mauvaissoir, also; he has long been the man-servant of Azedarac, though his name was Melchire in other days. These two have always been the underlings of evil, and have served the Old Ones in ways forgotten or never known by the Druids."

"Indeed, I hope you can explain what has happened," said Ambrose. "It is a fearsome and strange and ungodly thing, to drink a draft of wine in a tavern at eventide, and then find one's self in the heart of the forest by

afternoon daylight, among demons such as those from whom you succored me."

"Yea," countered Moriamis, "it is even stranger than you dream. Tell me, Brother Ambrose, what was the year in which you entered the Inn of Bonne Jouissance?"

"Why, it is the year of our Lord, 1175, of course. What other year could it be?"

"The Druids use a different chronology," replied Moriamis, "and their notation would mean nothing to you. But, according to that which the Christian missionaries would now introduce in Averoigne, the present year is 475 A.D. You have been sent back no less than seven hundred years into what the people of your era would regard as the past. The Druid altar on which I found you lying is probably located on the future site of the Inn of Bonne Jouissance."

Ambrose was more than dumbfounded. His mind was unable to grasp the entire import of Moriamis' words.

"But how can such things be?" he cried. "How can a man go backward in time, among years and people that have long turned to dust?"

"That, mayhap, is a mystery for Azedarac to unriddle. However, the past and the future co-exist with what we call the present, and are merely the two segments of the circle of time. We see them and name them according to our own position in the circle."

Ambrose felt that he had fallen among necromancies of a most unhallowed and unexampled sort, and had been made the victim of diableries unknown to the Christian catalogues.

Tongue-tied by a consciousness that all comment, all protest or even prayer would prove inadequate to the situation, he saw that a stone tower with small lozenge-shaped windows was now visible above the turrets of pine along the path which he and Moriamis were following.

"This is my home," said Moriamis, as they came forth from beneath the thinning trees at the foot of a little knoll on which the tower was situated. "Brother Ambrose, you must be my guest."

Ambrose was unable to decline the proffered hospitality, in spite of his feeling that Moriamis was hardly the most suitable of chatelaines for a chaste and God-fearing monk. However, the pious misgivings with which she inspired him were not unmingled with fascination. Also, like a lost child, he clung to the only available protection in a land of fearful perils and astounding mysteries.

The interior of the tower was neat and clean and home-like, though

with furniture of a ruder sort than that to which Ambrose was accustomed, and rich but roughly woven arrases. A serving-woman, tall as Moriamis herself, but darker, brought to him a huge bowl of milk and wheaten bread, and the monk was now able to assuage the hunger that had gone unsatisfied in the Inn of Bonne Jouissance.

As he seated himself before the simple fare, he realized that the *Book of Eibon* was still heavy in the bosom of his gown. He removed the volume, and gave it gingerly to Moriamis. Her eyes widened, but she made no comment until he had finished his meal. Then she said:

"This volume is indeed the property of Azedarac, who was formerly a neighbor of mine. I know the scoundrel quite well—in fact, I knew him all too well." Her bosom heaved with an obscure emotion as she paused for a moment. "He was the wisest and the mightiest of sorcerers, and the most secret withal; for no one knew the time and the manner of his coming into Averoigne, or the fashion in which he had procured the immemorial *Book of Eibon*, whose runic writings were beyond the lore of all other wizards. He was master of all enchantments and all demons, and likewise a compounder of mighty potions. Among these were certain philtres, blended with potent spells and possessed of unique virtue, that would send the drinker backward or forward in time. One of them, I believe, was administered to you by Melchire, or Jehan Mauvaissoir; and Azedarac himself, together with this man-servant, made use of another—perhaps not for the first time—when they went onward from the present age of the Druids into that age of Christian authority to which you belong. There was a blood-red vial for the past, and a green for the future. Behold! I possess one of each—though Azedarac was unaware that I knew of their existence."

She opened a little cupboard, in which were the various charms and medicaments, the sun-dried herbs and moon-compounded essences that a sorceress would employ. From among them she brought out the two vials, one of which contained a sanguine-colored liquid, and the other a fluid of emerald brightness.

"I stole them one day, out of womanly curiosity, from his hidden store of philtres and elixirs and magistrals," continued Moriamis. "I could have followed the rascal when he disappeared into the future, if I had chosen to do so. But I am well enough content with my own age; and moreover, I am not the sort of woman who pursues a wearied and reluctant lover...."

"Then," said Ambrose, more bewildered than ever, but hopeful, "if I were to drink the contents of the green vial, I should return to my own epoch."

"Precisely. And I am sure, from what you have told me, that your return would be a source of much annoyance to Azedarac. It is like the fellow, to have established himself in a fat prelacy. He was ever the master of circumstance, with an eye to his own accommodation and comfort. It would hardly please him, I am sure, if you were to reach the Archbishop. . I am not revengeful by nature . . . but on the other hand—"

"It is hard to understand how any one could have wearied of you," said Ambrose, gallantly, as he began to comprehend the situation.

Moriamis smiled. "That is prettily said. And you are really a charming youth, in spite of that dismal-looking robe. I am glad that I rescued you from the Druids, who would have torn your heart out and offered it to their demon, Taranit."

"And now you will send me back?"

Moriamis frowned a little, and then assumed her most seductive air.

"Are you in such a hurry to leave your hostess? Now that you are living in another century than your own, a day, a week or a month will make no difference in the date of your return. I have also retained the formulas of Azedarac; and I know how to graduate the potion, if necessary. The usual period of transportation in time is exactly seven hundred years; but the philtre can be strengthened or weakened a little."

The sun had fallen beyond the pines, and a soft twilight was beginning to invade the tower. The maid-servant had left the room. Moriamis came over and seated herself beside Ambrose on the rough bench he was occupying. Still smiling, she fixed her amber eyes upon him, with a languid flame in their depths—a flame that seemed to brighten as the dusk grew stronger. Without speaking, she began slowly to unbraid her heavy hair, from which there emanated a perfume that was subtle and delicious as the perfume of grape-flowers.

Ambrose was embarrassed by this delightful proximity. "I am not sure that it would be all right for me to remain, after all. What would the Archbishop think?"

"My dear child, the Archbishop will not even be born for at least six hundred and fifty years. And it will be still longer before you are born. And when you return, anything that you have done during your stay with me will have happened no less than seven centuries ago which should be long enough to procure the remission of any sin, no matter how often repeated."

Like a man who has been taken in the toils of some fantastic dream, and finds that the dream is not altogether disagreeable, Ambrose yielded to this feminine and irrefutable reasoning. He hardly knew what was to

happen; but, under the exceptional circumstances indicated by Moriamis, the rigors of monastic discipline might well be relaxed to almost any conceivable degree, without entailing spiritual perdition or even a serious breach of vows.

A MONTH LATER, Moriamis and Ambrose were standing beside the Druid altar. It was late in the evening; and a slightly gibbous moon had risen upon the deserted glade and was fringing the treetops with wefted silver. The warm breath of the summer night was gentle as the sighing of a woman in slumber.

"Must you go, after all?" said Moriamis, in a pleading and regretful voice.

"It is my duty. I must return to Clement with the *Book of Eibon* and the other evidence I have collected against Azedarac." The words sounded a little unreal to Ambrose as he uttered them; and he tried very hard, but vainly to convince himself of the cogency and validity of his arguments. The idyl of his stay with Moriamis, to which he was oddly unable to attach any true conviction of sin, had given to all that preceded it a certain dismal insubstantiality. Free from all responsibility or restraint, in the sheer obviousness of dreams, he had lived like a happy pagan; and now he must go back to the drear existence of a mediaeval monk, beneath the prompting of an obscure sense of duty.

"I shall not try to hold you," Moriamis sighed. "But I shall miss you, and remember you as a worthy lover and a pleasant playmate. Here is the philtre."

The green essence was cold and almost hueless in the moonlight, as Moriamis poured it into a cup and gave it to Ambrose.

"Are you sure of its precise efficacy?" the monk inquired. "Are you sure that I shall return to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, at a time not far subsequent to that of my departure therefrom?"

"Yea," said Moriamis, "for the potion is infallible. But stay, I have also brought along the other vial—the vial of the past. Take it with you for who knows, you may sometime wish to return and visit me again."

Ambrose accepted the red vial and placed it in his robe beside the ancient manual of Hyperborean sorcery. Then, after an appropriate farewell to Moriamis, he drained with sudden resolution the contents of the cup.

The moonlit glade, the gray altar, and Moriamis, all vanished in a swirl

of flame and shadow. It seemed to Ambrose that he was soaring endlessly through fantasmagoric gulfs, amid the ceaseless shifting and melting of unstable things, the transient forming and fading of irresoluble worlds.

At the end, he found himself sitting once more in the Inn of Bonne Jouissance, at what he assumed to be the very same table before which he had sat with the Sieur des Emaux. It was daylight, and the room was full of people, among whom he looked in vain for the rubicund face of the innkeeper, or the servants and fellow-guests he had previously seen. All were unfamiliar to him; and the furniture was strangely worn, and was grimier than he remembered it.

Perceiving the presence of Ambrose, the people began to eye him with open curiosity and wonderment. A tall man with dolorous eyes and lantern jaws came hastily forward and bowed before him with an air that was half servile but full of a prying impertinence.

"What do you wish?" he asked.

"Is this the Inn of Bonne Jouissance?"

The innkeeper stared at Ambrose. "Nay, it is the Inn of Haute Esperance, of which I have been the taverner these thirty years. Could you not read the sign? It was called the Inn of Bonne Jouissance in my father's time, but the name was changed after his death."

Ambrose was filled with consternation. "But the inn was differently named, and was kept by another man when I visited it not long ago," he cried in his bewilderment. "The owner was a stout, jovial man, not in the least like you."

"The would answer the description of my father," said the taverner, eyeing Ambrose more dubiously than ever. "He has been dead for the full thirty years of which I speak; and surely you were not even born at the time of his decease."

Ambrose began to realize what had happened. The emerald potion, by some error or excess of potency, had taken him many years beyond his own time into the future!

"I must resume my journey to Vyones," he said in a bewildered voice, without fully comprehending the implications of his situation. "I have a message for the Archbishop Clement—and must not delay longer in delivering it."

"But Clement has been dead even longer than my father," exclaimed the innkeeper. "From whence do you come, that you are ignorant of this?" It was plain from his manner that he had begun to doubt the sanity of Ambrose. Others, overhearing the strange discussion, had begun to

crowd about, and were plying the monk with jocular and sometimes ribald questions.

"And what of Azedarac, the Bishop of Ximes? Is he dead, too?" inquired Ambrose, desperately.

"You mean St. Azedarac, no doubt. He outlived Clement, but nevertheless he has been dead and duly canonized for thirty-two years. Some say that he did not die, but was transported to heaven alive, and that his body was never buried in the great mausoleum reared for him at Ximes. But that is probably a mere legend."

Ambrose was overwhelmed with unspeakable desolation and confusion. In the meanwhile, the crowd about him had increased, and in spite of his robe, he was being made the subject of rude remarks and jeers.

"The good Brother has lost his wits," cried some. "The wines of Averoigne are too strong for him," said others.

"What year is this?" demanded Ambrose, in his desperation.

"The year of our Lord, 1230," replied the taverner, breaking into a derisive laugh. "And what year did you think it was?"

"It was the year 1175 when I last visited the Inn of Bonne Jouissance," admitted Ambrose.

His declaration was greeted with fresh jeers and laughter. "Hola, young sir, you were not even conceived at that time," the taverner said. Then, seeming to remember something, he went on in a more thoughtful tone: "When I was a child, my father told me of a young monk, about your age, who came to the Inn of Bonne Jouissance one evening in the summer of 1175, and vanished inexplicably after drinking a draft of red wine. I believe his name was Ambrose. Perhaps you are Ambrose, and have only just returned from a visit to nowhere." He gave a derisory wink, and the new jest was taken up and bandied from mouth to mouth among the frequenters of the tavern.

Ambrose was trying to realize the full import of his predicament. His mission was now useless, through the death or disappearance of Azedarac; and no one would remain in all Averoigne to recognize him or believe his story. He felt the hopelessness of his alienation among unknown years and people.

Suddenly he remembered the red vial given him at parting by Moriamis. The potion, like the green philtre, might prove uncertain in its effect; but he was seized by an all-consuming desire to escape from the weird embarrassment and wilderment of his present position. Also, he longed for Moriamis like a lost child for its mother, and the charm of his sojourn in the past was upon him with an irresistible spell. Ignoring the ribald faces

and voices about him, he drew the vial from his bosom, uncorked it, and swallowed the contents . . .

5

HE WAS BACK IN the forest glade, by the gigantic altar. Moriamis was beside him again, lovely and warm and breathing; and the moon was still rising above the pine-tops. It seemed that no more than a few moments could have elapsed since he had said farewell to the beloved enchantress.

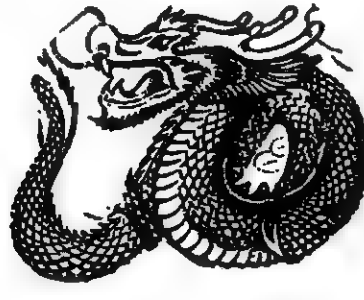
"I thought you might return," said Moriamis. "And I waited a little while."

Ambrose told her of the singular mishap that had attended his journey in time.

Moriamis nodded gravely. "The green philtre was more potent than I had supposed," she remarked. "It is fortunate, though, that the red philtre was equivalently strong, and could bring you back to me through all those added years. You will have to remain with me now, for I possessed only the two vials. I hope you are not sorry."

Ambrose proceeded to prove, in a somewhat unmonastic manner, that her hope was fully justified.

Neither then nor at any other time did Moriamis tell him that she herself had strengthened slightly and equally the two philtres by means of the private formula which she had also stolen from Azedarac.



THE ASHLEY PREMIERE

BY EDDY C. BERTIN

(author of *A Taste of Rain and Darkness*)

For an actor there is no horror like that when he can feel himself disintegrating on stage ...

HE STUMBLED INTO THE CAFE, and steadied himself against the wall. During a few seconds, he had to close his eyes against the painful tornado of light, which engulfed him in colored waves. The darkness was behind him now, a still beckoning protection. How easy it would be to let loose his last hold on the world, and drown in the waves of nocturnal obscurity.

But no! He had to hold on, he had to accept the weakness and the pain, and fight them. Slowly, he opened his eyes, letting the light come in in small shards, glittering daggers thrust in his pupils. He waited until he was able to control all his muscles completely, before he risked moving his feet again. *Careful,* he said to himself, a whispered draught, *very careful now.* He started concentrating on the difficult art of walking. *First the left foot, yes, like that.* Very slowly. God, his knees felt like rubber, they threatened to melt under his weight and flow away over the floor. His feet were as two enormous lead blocks, trailing behind him. *Now the right foot, move it forward, slowly, easy, yes, yes! That's it. Now again the left one.* He stumbled again, cursing himself. *Don't give up, damn you, damn the*

weakness and the hurt. But DON'T give up. Carefully, foot by foot, moving forward as an automation, a will-controlled machine, he walked to the bar.

A few customers looked at him curiously, wondering. *Don't think about them; let them look and think whatever pleases them in their cursed narrow minds.* Probably they all thought he was dead drunk. But he wasn't, no matter how he looked or acted. It was a week since he had tasted anything else but water. That was why he had come to the cafe in the first place, because he NEEDED a drink, more than anything else in the world right now.

This evening was the premiere. HIS premiere, the first showing of the latest creation of Gordon Ashley, world famous actor, well-known playwright and connoisseur of the classics, who had made his world-fame by his disputed modern interpretation of some of Shakespeare's works. This evening, for the first time, he, Gordon Ashley, would play the leading part in one of his works, *The First Thunder of May*, a violent satire on *Hamlet*. He had reached the bar now. He took a deep breath, the air hissing between his bared teeth. His lungs hurt dreadfully. He tried to control the waver in his voice, without much success. He asked for a strong cognac, knowing in advance that the stuff he'd get would only be a weak substitute. Still, it was better than nothing.

The barkeeper took a good look at him, and asked for immediate payment. "It is usual here, sir," he apologized; "too many customers, you know." *And too many drunks, no doubt*, Gordon completed the unspoken thought for himself. He paid, and pocketed the change loosely. He reached for the Napoleon glass, constraining the tremor of his hands. *Concentrate*, his mind whispered, *concentrate, make your brain a computer, your body a machine. You must strengthen your muscles, as wheels of that machine; you must form metal claws in which you hold your weak body prisoner.*

His arm became a level, his hand a forceps. Concentrate, that's it. He was going to make it, all right, weakness or not. His fingers stopped trembling. He took the glass and drank, not in one draught, but with small sips, rinsing his palate. He felt the fire drip down into his inside, burning, giving his body the force it needed so badly. He paid for a second drink. His speech became more easy, less painful, less hurting. A numbness settled over his stomach, and slowly the world stopped spinning around like a madhouse.

How had he arrived here, in fact? The last thing he clearly remembered, was seeing the light of the cafe in front of him. And before there was a

vague memory of a long walk, of crawling, of a constantly mounting tiredness, and the nagging weakness of his body.

"Well, what a surprise," a voice said behind him. He didn't know, or maybe didn't recognise the voice. He half turned, groaning inside, *Oh no, not again, not now!* Not another autograph hunter, or a reporter, or one of those who wanted to be able to say, "You Know Whom I Talked To Last Night?"

"Sorry, I hope I'm not disturbing you," the stranger said, "but you ARE Gordon Ashley, THE Gordon Ashley, aren't you? The man who never missed a single performance. You don't know ME of course, I'm Marvin Destanberg, a great admirer of you."

"That's fine, thanks," Gordon Ashley murmured, ignoring the offered hand. His mind was in turmoil—*no, please, no conversation now.* He had to concentrate on that part he had to play within the next hour. And therefore he needed alcohol, to keep him upright, and not leaning against the bar as he was doing now, to bring some strength into those damned weak legs. To keep his mind on the act, not on what had happened.

The stranger was not to be offended so easily. He just kept on spilling words in a steady, drowning flood of meaningless sounds. "Just imagine when I tell my wife I've been speaking with THE Gordon Ashley, the actor whose name will be all over town tomorrow. Gordon Ashley, the man who disappears mysteriously during a few weeks to study his part, and who reappears the evening of the show. You'll give me your autograph, will you?" God, if he only could get rid of this nuisance, shake him as he would an annoying insect.

"Of course, with pleasure," he heard his own voice murmur hoarsely. He saw the strange expression on his listener's face. *He must be thinking I'm loaded,* Gordon thought. *Let him think, let them all think what they like, and curse their damned minds. Just let them come and watch* First Thunder of May *this evening, then they'll see real acting.*

His shaking fingers searched for his pen, without finding it; and finally he grabbed the ball-point his admirer offered him. He scribbled his name on the piece of paper, loosely torn from an old note-book his admirer had in his pocket.

The world around him was turning slowly, very slowly. There were immense black holes in the world, and he feared falling through one. He had to get out of here. He couldn't concentrate here, and it was so necessary for the piece. This show just had to go on; it was his own, all his very own flesh and blood and mind. He had carried it as a pregnancy, and

now he had to give birth and life to it. Never he had missed a premiere, and he wouldn't now.

He excused himself and reeled outside, followed by the soft whispering from the crowd, from which he catched a remark here and there, sticking on his mind, like flies on flypaper: "disappointing...such a personality...I wonder how he will ever be able...just drink...they all drink, my dear, my mother always said..."

The idiots, the damned poor idiots, if they could only know. But let them laugh, let them whisper behind his back. He, Gordon Ashley, would stand before them this evening in the cold-burning lights, and the theater an empty hole before him, and he would be as calm, as powerful as ever.

Night was a protecting cloak, gathered around him as he walked. He looked at his watch. The glass was broken and wet; the hands stood still. He must have bumped into something on his way to the cafe. Perhaps he had fallen... His eyes searched—yes, there was a jeweler's shop, with a big clock outside it. Half-past seven already; he'd have to hurry—he'd never get there on time if he walked. He needed a taxi, quickly.

Luck was with him. He gave the driver a large tip. Staggering into the artist's entrance, he again tried to steady himself against the wall. Another actor saw him and tried to help, but Ashley rejected the offered hands. He managed to get into his dressing room on his own, and seated himself before the large make-up mirror. With trembling hands, he sought the bottle which was in the lowest drawer of his desk, and drank from it. If he could only get rid of this weakness, he'd manage the evening, although he could feel something of his confidence leaving him.

For a few seconds, the alcohol brought back some of his strength; but then the coldness returned and left his body shivering, as if icy water ran through his veins.

He started making up. In the mirror, he saw Rena enter and look at him. She wrinkled her nose, one of her annoying habits, which he had put to excellent use, however, in the play, in which she was his opposite number this evening.

"They told me you were drunk," she said, "and I can smell it till here. Drinking is not one of your bad habits, whatever the rest are. What's going wrong, Gordon? You think you'll manage the show this evening?" He went on shading his eyes and adjusting the small moustache. He didn't trust his voice enough to answer her; he only gave her a short nod.

"You DO look sick," she said. Another nod. She waited, but he didn't venture further explanations. He waited for her to ask if she should get a doctor, but she only shrugged and went out. He tried to stop the shaking,

which was spoiling his delicate make-up. But he couldn't; his hands seemed to possess a life of their own; they were like trembling, pulsating jelly fish, boneless. He closed his eyes, and concentrated. He almost felt his own will-power gliding through his nerves and steadying his hands. He got up and managed to walk, without stumbling too much. Through a tear in the curtain, he took a look into the house. Completely full. Good. This evening they would see what real acting was like. He'd finished his make-up just in time.

The music started, and the buzz faded away into an expectant silence. He gave a short sign to Rena. The curtain opened, and *The First Thunder of May* began. Rena gave an excellent introductory performance as the slightly neurotic woman. He caught himself making content little nods with his head; she really WAS the woman he had written in his play.

With steady steps, he walked onto the stage, in the blinding lights. He was full of confidence now. This was his creation, every word of it; each little movement of his hands was his very own. He had given them to the public, he was giving them now. This was no stage, this was his reality. He played for himself, as he would for an empty house. The words, the sentences that came rolling out, his movements weren't made, they were HIS. Nobody even so much as whispered in the auditorium.

But deep in him, he felt the weakness, waiting, lurking. And then, in the midst of an important sentence, he faltered. He saved himself by improvising a coughing-fit. As he was playing a sick person, nobody noticed. But Rena had to whisper the next cue, and her words seemed to come from an enormous distance. Then during a hurried movement, his left leg refused. It was as if all his muscles suddenly decided to rebel. A fain murmur went through the audience... So they had noticed this time. More and more he had to search for his lines; new falterings came, as if there were empty places in his memory. Sometimes he could save his face by improvisation, but not always. He saw the surprised and slightly accusing looks of Rena. He thought he saw the banker, who financed the play, behind the curtains, in a heated discussion with one of the other leading actors.

Gordon knew he was acting badly now. All his talent seemed to have left him. More gaps appeared in his memory, as if something was stealing everything straight from his brain, taking whole parts away. Sudden cramps of his muscles made his body do strange and bizarre movements, not unlike a badly controlled puppet.

The fluid hand movements, of which he had always been so proud,

became wooden; his voice turned raucous, the words jerky. He felt sick, sick; the darkness in him came up as vomit, in great black clouding gulps, swallowing him. He felt the concentrating will-power leading away from his body, as if it were running out of his very pores. His mind went white, then black, and there were no sounds, no lights left. He knew he had lost then, and once so far, it was so easy to stop all struggle, give up completely and surrender to the dark waves, which carried him with them into the sea. The world was a black hole, a gaping, toothless mouth; and in that mouth, faces, countless white faces looking surprised and somewhat frightened up at him. He had done his best for them, but he hadn't strength to keep it up. He opened his mouth, but no sounds came. Something wet ran from his eye-sockets and dripped red on the floor of the stage.

Then someone started screaming in the audience.

"Curtain, curtain!" Rena shrieked. The curtain crashed down, but too late to hide from the public that which still stood upright on the scene, a few seconds, before its legs bent and fell down.

Gordon Ashley accepted the darkness and the weakness now. There was no stage, no world, only enormous black wings, coming closer and closer...

After two pale agents had covered that which was lying on the stage with a sheet, the real inquisition started. They found Gordon's car finally, near the cliffs by the sea, partly under water, where it had been lying for over a week. The door was open, and on a few places, where the sea didn't reach the sand, they found the trail, where something had worked itself out of the sea. Something which was no longer alive, but not quite dead either—a mass of bones and already rotting muscles and disintegrating flesh, which, driven by fanatic will-power, had wrestled itself out of the wrecked car, and had come back for Gordon Ashley's premiere.

CACILLIA

BY REINSMITH

Cacillia would be his when he paid the price ...

MIST LAY ON THE GROUND AS OPAQUE as a solid substance and at a height level with my chest. I crept through the mist with my shoulders hunched, the knife ready in my hand.

Cacillia had ordered me to kill again tonight. I would kill, for her, although every fiber of my heart, mind, and soul would be sickened by the killing. Afterwards—I would be gripped by a coldness that reached my bones, I would tremble violently with the chill of memory and I would feel as dead as the prey.

It had been several minutes since I had stopped to check my bearings, so I stopped and

listened

carefully

totally

for sound in the mist is the most important of all. The long green snakes crawl unseen through the mist, they travel in small herds as animals of the plains or as schools of fish and you must listen for them in the valley where the mist is so thick because, if you do not, you may suddenly find yourself walking on them. They will be everywhere beneath your feet, writhing as living but death-giving grass and you will feel their poisonous forked tongues and fangs. You *can* hear them. If you stand absolutely still in the mist with every ounce of your body and mind tuned to your ears,

you can hear them in the distance as a sad muted hissing much like a mournful sighing.

You can tell if the sound is growing stronger. If it is coming closer, then you must move quickly either to the left or right. Stop. Listen again. The snakes, in a herd, are never more than a few yards in diameter. In the blindness of the mist, if you hear their sighing growing fainter, you will know they have passed.

I listened for the other dangers. The Lebbok, giant turtle more than five feet tall, is as deadly as the snakes. The Lebbok manner of giving death is not as slow and painful as the one from the snakes, it is a sharp quick bite of its mouths—huge enough to cut a man in half.

The bees can be heard in the mist. If a man meets one of their swarms, it is not always a promise of death. Sometimes a man will live for days or weeks or months with his flesh achingly swollen and itching from their thousands of stings...a man may live but, until fully recovered, may pray for death.

Cacillia had instructed me, so I listened carefully. From far on the other side of the valley came the heavy hard scraping sound of a Lebbok.

Nearer, much nearer, the deep thump thump heartbeat of a huge Gargon.

I straightened—raising until my eyes were only an inch above the top layer of mist. I saw the Gargon and turned straight in that direction. The surface of the mist was shaped as the rolling waves of a sea, but a frozen sea, for there was no movement on the gray surface. I sank beneath the mist again. *A periscope,* I thought. *Much like a periscope—my head and eyes. The submarine—my body. And I travel in a sea of horror.*

Twice during the journey to the Gargon, I stopped and listened. I heard some of the snakes once but, as I remained still the sound died and faded completely.

The thump thump of the Gargon's heart grew in the gray misty blindness. I felt the heartbeat through the soles of my shoes, his heartbeat reverberating through the ground, it was chillingly like walking on the beast's heart.

I stopped again and peered above the mist to see my prey's exact location.

I saw:

Only a few yards away, the giant back of the gargon rising more than two dozen feet above the still mist.

I crept closer and found the neck.

The vein.

Pulsing.

So regular in sleep.

I raised the knife...

And slashed the huge jugular.

The warm blood poured on me by the bucketsful—and my scream of horror at my own deed was lost in the deathscream of the Gargon. It raised on its huge feet—more tremendous than an elephant—and crashed to the ground.

Sleep, a voice in me cried. *Sleep again, sleep forever.*

I could hear the great beast kicking and twitching. I felt tears on my cheeks and ran through the mist, holding tight to the knife so covered with blood—my hand so covered with blood. Once I had dropped one of the knives after slaying a Gargon—lost it somewhere in the mist, never to be found again. I had returned to Cacillia with my triumphant news of death but she had frowned and said, "Where is the knife?"

"I lost it."

"You fool!"

Her eyes had flashed with fire and her beautiful face had turned ugly. Cacillia had seized a whip from the ring in the stone wall and said, "Now you must learn the value of a knife."

Pain... That was the pain-filled night that Cacillia taught me all the different kinds of pain. I will never forget.

And will never drop another of the pearl-handled knives...

The Gargon's blood had drenched my right side—from my shoulder to my foot. The stench of the warm blood hung as a cloud and, as I paused to listen again for some sign of danger, the stench of blood came strong from my clothes.

I heard a rustling of water and crawled in that direction—the smell of the huge beast's death clutching my stomach...

"I have to clean away the blood," I whispered. "I killed it but only because I *had* to kill it. I will not lose another knife. Cacillia will be waiting. I must hurry with washing the blood away and—"

"Wake up, Erik." May's voice. I felt her soft hand on my shoulder, gently rocking me.

A part of my mind did not know May, that part whispered through my lips, "I have killed a dozen. I am sick with the killing and the blood but I must go on killing them because Cacillia is so beautiful, I must have her and she has said she will be mine if I kill all the Gargons in the valley. The

bad part is the first bite of the knife into the jugular vein, the first splash of blood. Their heads are so large you have to reach high to cut the vein. And you have to stand close. When you are sure the blade has sliced through the flesh and tissue of the vein, you must turn quickly and run. If you do not—"

"Wake up, Erik. Stop mumbling, will you?"

"—the blood will fall over you like a waterfall."

"Erik!"

"—waterfall waterfall a waterfall a—"

I sat up in bed with my throat straining to scream. I had been caught in the waterfall of blood twice—enough to cause a hundred nightmares. But I saw our bedroom. May smiled at me as she turned her head on the pillow.

"You're a dreamer," she said. She yawned.

"Gargons. They're larger than elephants. You have to kill them while they sleep. They—" I ran a trembling hand across my face.

"Did you say elephants? Were you dreaming about elephants, honey?"

"I had a knife. I have to—"

"You had a *what?*" May shifted her legs beneath the blankets. She yawned again.

Invisible clicking in my skull. The last of sleep fading. The maximum consciousness returned. I said, "Was I talking in my sleep?"

"You certainly were."

"What did I say?"

She closed her eyes. Moonlight bathed her lovely face. "You mumbled so much..."

"You didn't *hear?*"

"Didn't understand." She sighed sleepily.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up."

"S'allright. But, if you're having trouble sleeping, why don't you take one of those pills?"

I shuffled through our darkened house. Kitchen table, chairs. Faucet drip-dripping, cold methodical lonely sound in the sink, but a very real sound.

My footsteps shuffle across the floor...

Nightlights in most rooms.

Sofa, TV, lamps, bookcase, yesterday's newspaper. I see them and I try to think they are real but I know I could be in the valley of Gargons, asleep, dreaming all this.

I open the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

Sleeping pills.

One.

Glass of water.

I shuffle toward the bedroom and pause by the front door to peer out at the world.

Rows and rows of houses all very similar to the one May and I live in—sleep in—dream in. Yards are different. Some trees planted. Shrubs. Houses positioned in various directions. A light in a window two house-rows distant. Someone else having a nightmare?

In bed again, I feel sleep coming, darkness growing...

Cacillia sits before me. In a filmy gown as white and revealing as a curtain of snowflakes, she is the most beautiful woman in the world, she is enough to drive men mad...or drive them to murder. When I look at her, I feel my lust rising for her body like an irresistible tide. I want her more than anyone or anything I have ever wanted before.

I listen to the roar of the black waterfall near the hut. A steady sound, soothing, hypnotic...

Cacillia slips from her gown. She stands before me. I touch her breasts and place my hands between her thighs. Gently. My heart hammers, my flesh sweating... Cacillia steps back and slips into the gown again. It is all she has ever allowed me—a few moments of pressing my fingertips against the beauty of her body—a tease, a promise, a small maddening sample...

"Here is the knife." Cacillia has crossed the hut again, placing the knife in my hand.

I watch as she returns to her chair. I say, "You've never explained... Is this another world, a physical world I travel to when asleep? Or is this place in my imagination? A dream?" *Nightmare!* my mind corrected.

"Does it matter? You have made your decision." She smiled. "You agreed. You will have me after you have killed all the Gargons in the valley."

Yes. I held the knife in one hand and ran fingers of my other hand along the cold blade. Smooth. Hard. Real. This was a *real* world—lightyears away and reached by unconscious teleportation and transmutation of matter—or—reached by a sleeping-dreaming mind. The method did not matter. It was real enough, everything in it as real as May and our house on Earth.

"I guess you're right. It doesn't matter. Everything here is so real..." *She* would be *very* real to me after I paid the price!

With the knife in my hand, I opened the door. The mist swirled beyond the doorway...

"You promised to kill all the Gargons in the valley," Cacillia reminded me. "I have ways to hold you to that promise."

I had hesitated at the door because of memory of the horror of killing the huge beasts. It took *hours* to find and murder each one...so far I had only killed a dozen. Reluctant to step into the mist for the long chilling task of carrying death again, I waited and asked, "How many will I have to kill?"

It had always been impossible to estimate the size of the valley—I had wandered blindly through the mist and navigated to and from Cacillia's hut by the sound of the black waterfall. It had also been impossible to estimate the number of Gargons to be slaughtered.

Cacillia answered and I stepped out into the mist with a scream tearing my throat: I knew I would scream until my throat became raw. Then I would go on and on with the horror of killing the huge Gargons—Cacillia's answer ringing in my ears beneath the sound of my screaming, "Ten thousand."

INQUISITIONS

(Continued from Page 83)

Of the latter, the selections by Dunsany (not repeated in the Dunsany collection), and Cabell are particularly fine, though while both swords and sorcery abound in Cabell's fantasies, these are not heroic fantasies; they are closer to Voltaire then to Robert E. Howard. Of the former, the selections by Clark Ashton Smith (not in the *Zothique* series), Howard, and Merritt are especially good, even though I had read them many times before; they do stand up. I do not mean, thus, to denigrate any of the others—the two Lovecraft tales never grow tiresome, for example—but rather to say that these I mention gave me the most pleasure and the Cabell was new to me. The editor's two selections show that, even though not a veteran word-magician, he's a worthy one; and, as with the preceding volume, the introduction and comments upon the several items are very well done. Recommended.

THE WOMAN IN GRAY

BY WALTER G. EVERETT

As Farnsworth Wright was often to acknowledge, some of the most popular stories published in *WEIRD TALES* were short-shorts, bought as fillers, and fitted in where the occasion called for them, without fanfare and without illustrations. WALKER G. EVERETT appeared thus in the June 1935 issue, and for months thereafter, readers wrote in praise of this little tale—but Mr. Walker was never seen in WT again. One hopes that he didn't get to hate his story....

BILL WAS AT A DINNER PARTY at the Carters when the subject first came up—a dinner to which he would never have gone if he could have thought of a plausible excuse. Sarah Carter had a girl visiting her from the East; her school roommate or something. Bill was her dinner partner. They were talking about some people she didn't like.

"And they told it all over town," she said, "that I was the girl that was caught at the roadhouse, and that I had a red wig on so nobody would know me. Oh how I wish I could get even with them—the most hateful people. Haven't you any suggestions?"

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Bill looked pensive. Many martinis had set up a pleasant buzzing in his brain, and everything in life seemed very easy. "You might tell everybody they have a crazy locked-up daughter nobody ever sees, and that's why they don't like young girls."

"Too easy. They have *three* daughters, all crazy, only not locked up. That is, yet."

"In that case, I don't know," said Bill. "Why don't you just leave it to me?"

She looked at him. "What do you mean? Do you make little wax images and stick pins in them?"

Ah! There she had stolen a march on him—because that was just what he was going to say. So he took a piece of celery, applied his mental spurs to himself, and came out in an inspiration.

"Haven't I ever told you about the woman in gray?"

"No! Who is she?"

"Just a woman in gray."

"Well, where is she?"

"She's right here beside me now."

"Where?"

"Oh," said Bill confidently, getting into his stride, "you can't see her, but she's right here by me all the time. I've known her for years."

"Heavens!" exclaimed his partner. "Aren't you scared? Doesn't she hurt you?"

"Oh, no. She *likes* me. That's why she stays here—isn't it, Woman?" He turned and nodded to one side. "Of course, she's very modest and goes out of the room when I'm undressed, but all the rest of the time she's here. Even her face is gray."

"Well," said the girl, making a violent effort to keep the conversation going, "doesn't she do anything at all?"

"Certainly. She gets after people I don't like."

"How terrible! Well, sic her on the Quarrys in Hartford, then. Tell her to do her worst."

"I will, right now. ... Did you hear that, Woman? Hartford, Connecticut; Quarry's the name."

"The third house from the corner on the left," said the girl. "I don't want her to make a mistake."

"She never makes a mistake," said Bill; "and now, I think dinner's over and we can get down to the serious part of the evening."

And that was the last Bill thought about it for two weeks, until Sarah

Carter plowed across the room at a cocktail party, and said, "What's this about some Woman in Gray?"

"I don't know," said Bill. "What do you mean?"

"I had a letter from Elsa. She said to tell you your Woman in Gray did the work a little too well, and that you'd better be careful."

Bill looked thoughtful. "What else did she say?"

"Something about a family named Quarry. They had an automobile accident, and all died—five, I think."

"What a coincidence!" said Bill. "And what a story!"

He lost no time in telling it around, of course. It was a good story, with enough of pleasant actual horror in it, but not too much, the Quarrys remaining mythical; so that it was worth a chill and a laugh any place.

Two weeks later, he was at a dinner at Corinne Gorman's house—a fine, old-fashioned dinner with old-fashioned cocktails before, new-fashioned highballs after, and good old-fashioned screaming all the way through. Bill sat by Corinne; her short boyish hair was circled with a gold band, and she had on a red velvet dress. She turned to him and pointed to two empty seats.

"I could kill those people," said Corinne. "They're always hours late anyway, and they finally phone from Winnetka that they've broken down." She tamped out a nice long two and one-half inch cigarette butt until it was twisted and grub-like. "Why don't you sic your Woman in Gray on them for me?"

"I would, but I don't hate them. *I* don't want them to turn over like the Quarrys," Bill answered.

"How well do you know them?"

"Not very well."

"Well, I can tell you some things. They've named their children 'Peggy Jean' and 'Michael Peter'; they have some name for their car; they go to the circus every year and laugh and laugh and eat crackerjack and peanuts—that's the kind of people they are."

"Oh well," said Bill, "I'd just as soon hate them myself. Sure, I'll send the Gray Woman after them—only they'd better look out."

That was the last they thought of it until dinner was nearly over, and Corinne was called to the telephone. She came back white.

"It was they," she whispered. "Terrible accident; a taxi hit them, Don't tell anybody for a minute."

"Were they badly hurt?" Bill asked.

"Yes."

He wondered suddenly if he ought to say anything about the absurd conversation regarding the Gray Woman. He decided not. Two coincidences were just a little too much. He knew there was nothing in it—hadn't he made her up out of a clear sky, just to amuse a guest of Sarah Carter? But, just the same, he felt it would be a little much to allude to it. However, Corinne soon saved him the trouble.

"Never mention that Gray Woman again," she said. "Never, never, never, never."

"Oh, that didn't have anything to do with it," said Bill. "You know that."

"Well ... I do. But it's a little too strange, that's all as if Santa Claus should suddenly come down the chimney."

"Or you'd find a baby in a cabbage."

"I think that would be a great improvement," said Corinne. "But this isn't any time to be funny. I'll tell them now and start the shrieks."

So Bill's Woman in Gray story became even more famous. "It's the funniest thing," people said; "somebody ought to send it in to the *NEW YORKER*. And, you know, Bill is such a scream about it—he's afraid to hate anybody, he says, for fear she'll get after them—and he's going to rent her to the Government in the next war."

But Bill didn't think he was funny. He thought this, while not exactly playing with fire, was at least in bad taste. He didn't think he was in very good taste, anyway, for about this time he had a bad week; seven nights of drinking and running around town, cashing checks, all the time with a low wormish feeling of approaching reckoning under all the talking, talking of nightly parties to get rid of yesterday's hangover. And every day down at the office getting blearier, going to the water cooler with the aspirin bottle in his hand and standing blindly in the window when the terrible eleven-thirty nausea swept over him in waves. But he didn't know what to do, because life didn't have much meaning, anyway, and he was having a better time than most people.

One warm night—it was the next Monday—he sat in his room, alone. The window was open, on blackness, soft and flecked with gold. The curtains were limp; his electric fan turned its flat face wearily from side to side, stirring up an ineffectual commotion in the air. A bell rang; he answered.

"Mr. Jacobson to see you."

"Tell him to come up."

What could he want, Jacobson from the office, whom he hardly knew, unctuous and self-righteous?

The door-bell buzzed.

"Come in. Good evening, good evening."

Jacobson came in and sat down. "Warm, isn't it?"

"Terribly."

"You probably wonder why I am here." Jacobson's mouse-like eyes took in the empty highball glass; the bowl of melted ice.

"Well," said Bill, "I do. Want a drink?"

"Thanks, no. Never touch it."

"Oh. O.K."

"What I wanted to see you about is this—Mr. Selfridge asked me to have a little talk with you—a friendly chat, merely, between friends."

Bill looked at him. "Yes?"

"It's about your work. A word to the wise, as it were."

"Oh. Have I been lying down on the job? Going to get the gate?"

"Oh, no; not that. But the first, perhaps a trifle. A little too many parties—eh? Mr. Selfridge thought that just a quiet tip from a friend..."

Bill was reminded of the smile of a snake. "I see," he said. "Thank you."

"Oh, not at all not at all. It's a pleasure."

"I don't doubt it."

"Oh, I didn't mean that! Well, I'll be running along." Jacobson got up. "Nice little place you have here."

"Yes," said Bill. "I like it." (How he hated the man! Why didn't Jacobson go?)

"Well, I'd better go now. I've got a new Chevy downstairs, and I have to go so slow it'll take me a while. I live in the suburbs, you know."

"Oh, you do? You have? How do you like it?"

"It's a fine little bus. You can see it from the window."

"I'll look out. Good-night. See you tomorrow."

"Good-night." And Jacobson was gone.

That ass and his Chevy, thought Bill. *I wish—*

He went to the window and looked out. Presently Jacobson came out, climbed into a little yellow car with a black patch on top, started out, and drove straight into the side of a big truck that had swung around the corner, with a horrible ripping and glassy noise.

"Good God!" said Bill.

He waited until he saw people, like sudden ants, flocking; then he came

back, mixed himself a highball, and sat down on the couch. It had happened again. And just after being told about his job. Everything he did seemed to be wrong. And it was all his own fault. He gulped down his drink and made another, stronger. The light seemed so bright, and made the room look so empty, with only those two black holes of windows, that he turned them out, and sat in the single ray that came from the bathroom.

When the lights were cut, the room changed; the black windows became, gradually, a soft warm blue, like a promise of day to come. It was the room that was dark. But Bill just sat there, tapping his foot to some radio music that drifted in. Then he spoke out loud, "God! I hate myself!"

Then the door opened, and in came the Woman in Gray. Now, it wasn't anyone dressed up to frighten him, or his sister come to call. It was the Woman in Gray, and Bill knew it. He looked at her steadily as she came nearer, quietly, delicately. He felt his brains run down the inside of his skull like melting drug-store ice; the room started to rock, and then to swirl faster and faster. Finally she was half-way across the floor. He threw his glass at her. It smashed against the opposite wall.

Bill stood up and whirled around—the whole room was swinging in a grayish haze. He turned to the window.

They found him the next morning, on the second-floor fire escape—one of those horizontal ones, with a weight on the end. He had landed almost in the middle, and was doing a ghastly little teeter-totter.

The Pentacle

Do not worry, I implore you, about the apparent size limitations of our meeting place, for there are means to enlarge it, providing, of course, that you provide me with the motive. Come as often as you like, stay as long as you wish, and within this figure you will be protected from the malice of those outside - though I cannot predict what will happen when you leave. The only rule is that you do not imitate them to the fullest degree of their customary calumny when speaking in opposition, whether to the editor, an author, or another reader within the diagram.

And I want to hear you, whether it turns out that your words (or all of them) are selected for the magic records or not. Now it would be most delightful if all of you who wish to write were in a position to send in missives typewritten double space, on one side only of standard size typing paper. However, I realize that everyone fortunate enough to read a copy of *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* is not always blessed with a typewriter; thus I welcome your comments, whether typed or handwritten, whether on the preference page (which is there only for convenience, and need not be used if some other means are more convenient to you) or a letter or postal card—so long as I can read your remarks. And your votes are welcome even if you have nothing else to say at the moment. All communications received will be read and considered, and all votes cast scored (provided they reach me before the polls close on a particular issue) if I can read them at all.

When you make any comment, I assume that you have given me permission to publish it, unless you specifically state that your comments (or any particular part of them) are not for publication. If you do not mind having your words published, but prefer that I do not use your name (either restricting it to initials, or withholding it entirely), this request will be honored; so long as your name is signed to the original, your opinions may be published. As you will note, I do not customarily print full addresses, and shall not do so unless specifically asked; on the other hand, if you request, I'll withhold all indications. Writing letters to an editor should not subject you to invasion of your privacy, and too often this has been the result of publishing readers' letters with full addresses.

The paragraph in italics on the Preference Page, just above the story title, should give you an indication of how we score ballots received. We do not score an "X" against a story, no matter how you denounce it, unless you specifically rate it "X". Nor do we score a "O" in favor of a story, no matter how you praise it, unless you specifically rate it "O". If you do not rate every item on the page, then in scoring we assign the blanks one point more than the scoring you gave to the story you least liked of those you did rate. In other words, if there were six stories in the issue, and you rated the three you liked best, 1, 2,

3, then the other three stories would be scored as 4. A "O" counts zero, of course. An "X" would count 7. Lowest total score is the winner, of course.

Some readers score their favorite tale in an issue both "O" and "1". This, of course, can't be followed; it has to be one or the other, so we count your enthusiasm and score a zero for the story, while transposing your other scores downward to conform. The only ballots we cannot score at all are either blank ones, or ballots where *all* the stories were marked either "O" or "X"—you think we haven't received that kind! Such ballots are worthless, although accompanying remarks might not be. The total score of each story at any time is of no value except in relation to the total scores of the others. So, since an all-zero or an all-X ballot keeps each story in exactly the same position it was before, such ballots are no more than curiosities. True, a relative position on my score sheet may be the same after scoring a proper ballot as they were before—but the margins between the stories will usually have been increased or diminished and the next ballot may result in two or more stories being tied, or shifts in position without ties.

As I type this, the Whitehead novella, *The Great Circle*, is almost a length ahead of Lovecraft's *The Doom that came to Sarnath*. What do I mean by "a length?" Well, there are five stories in this issue, so an "X" (which incurs a penalty point) is scored "6", while zero is always zero. So if the next ballot that came in rated the Whitehead story X and the Lovecraft story O, *The Great Circle* would now have a total score higher than *The Doom that came to Sarnath*, and HPL would thus be in first place. If Whitehead were a full length in the lead, then one such ballot would only put HPL into a tie with him. As things stand at the moment, the story now in last place is more than a length behind the story now in fourth position; all the rest are within a length of their immediate leaders.

I'd gladly let you know the deadline for ballots on this, and any other issues, if it were possible; but we are not yet on a tight enough schedule for me to be sure that the information would not prove to be misleading. I can only say—vote early and often, but only once for each issue.

David Charles Paskow writes from Penna.: "Naturally, a new title in your fantasy/horror fiction line is welcome and more than compensates for the two less issues of *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* yearly. I hope that the addition of *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* will ensure a Jules de Grandin story in each issue of *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* (since SMS will share quarterly billing with either BFT or MOH and thus give the anti-de Grandin faction a surplus of other material for that month). But perhaps the best cause for cheering is the fact that, as you stated in *LUNA No. 12*, the addition of BFT to your line will mean that at least one fantasy title will be available each month.

"Re *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES No. 1:* remember how I loathed the MOH logo that 'graced' the covers of issues 13-24? Well, prepare for a sustained assault on the logo of BFT—the only portion I feel is presentable is 'Tales'; if 'Bizarre' and 'Fantasy' were printed in the same style, the title would be presentable. At present it appears sloppy.

"It was a good first issue. Ratings: *The Great Circle*—0; *A Taste of Rain and Darkness*—1; *The Doom that came to Sarnath*—2; *The 'V' Force*—3; *Never Bet the Devil Your Head*—4. I'm tempted to be wishy-washy and say, 'Alternate policy between novelettes and novellas', but I won't. You have three other

magazines to work with, so why not make novellas a permanent policy of BFT, and retain a flexible policy with MOH, SWS, and WTT?

"Speaking of which, a quarterly schedule does not necessarily rule out serials: Part 1 in MOH, Part 2 in SMS (I would venture to guess that of all the fantasy title you edit, the greatest readership is shared between these two).

"One more point before I end this missive. *MAGAZINE OF HORROR, STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES, WEIRD TERROR TALES,* and now *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* are possibly the 'friendliest' magazines currently being published for their genre. You, kindly editor, are at least 80% responsible for this, for in your editorials, introductions and comments you make the reader feel that the magazine is being edited for him alone–reading MOH, SMS, WTT, and BFT is a personal experience and the Readers' columns, (the other 20%) have brought back the essence of the old *AMAZING STORIES, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, STARTLING STORIES* (and so on) letter cols and you don't have to be a recidivist to long for this type of letter column with its editor/reader dialogue. (Ted White comes close in his 'new' *AMAZING* and *FANTASTIC.*) While *MAGAZINE OF HORROR, STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES, WEIRD TERROR TALES* and *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* can never be *FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION, SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY, SCIENCE FICTION STORIES,* and *DYNAMIC SCIENCE FICTION,* they make the loss bearable and keep the memories fond."

Perhaps by the time you read this, our schedule will be stable, but right now it's still somewhat eccentric, as it will take time to get into the bi-monthly slot we expect to achieve. I shall try to make non-de Grandin issues of *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* fewer now, and am planning to use another de Grandin tale in our 19th issue of SMS.

No matter how it may sound, it is *not* a good idea to shift the installments of a serial from one magazine to another.

Ted H. Strauss writes: "You've done it again, Mr. Lowndes–another fine addition to your family of magazines. There's just one thing I'd like to comment on (before listing my preferences). I don't think it's fair to lump the novellas together with short stories and novelets in the same issue. Sort of like pairing watermelons and kumquats. All are valuable lengths for their purposes: the quick effect in the short story (and, to a lesser extent, in the novelet), the longer, more developed mood in the novellas. That is, short stories and novelet in one issue, novellas in another. Of course, please continue your wonderful policy of giving new authors a chance in *all* your titles, if possible. Therefore, perhaps one current short story, identified as new, could be included in the novella issue. Just a thought.

"As to my preferences in Issue No. 1: *The Great Circle:* 0 (beautifully written, well developed); *A Taste of Rain and Darkness:* 1 (marvelously gripping); *The 'Y' Force:* 2 (good fantasy); *Never Bet the Devil your Head:* 3 (lighthearted Poe ... interesting); *The Doom that came to Sarnath:* 4 (a bit too flowery for my taste). I liked the cover, though I'm not sure which story it's meant to illustrate."

Oh, the cover wasn't meant to illustrate any story in the issue–just the title of the magazine.

Theoretically, your idea about not running short stories in an issue with a novella has its merits, but when it comes down to practicality, there are difficulties. It isn't felt here that having

an issue with only two fiction items on the contents page (for two novellas is all we could get in, and that would prove very tricky at best) is a good thing. In general, the novella will be of such a length as to leave room only for a few short stories.

John Parker writes from Virginia: "My ratings for *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES No. 1* are: (1) *The Doom that came to Sarnath;* (2) *The Great Circle;* (3) *Never Bet the Devil Your Head;* (4) *A Taste of Rain and Darkness;* (5) *The 'V' Force.*

"I am very pleased to find another title among your list of publications. I have not seen anything of *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION* for quite a while, so maybe it is no longer among the living. Science fiction -I tend to think of rockets and gadgets–always left me cold; but some of the stories in FSF could fit in to the new title. As you say in your editorial, some of the stories of the 1920's "which seemed fairly acceptable as science fiction at the time ... can now be read only as fantasy." Indeed, there are many stories that would fit more happily into a fantasy magazine than into one of your other publications.

"*The Doom that came to Sarnath* was unlike any other Lovecraft story I have ever read. I thoroughly enjoyed the ornate descriptiveness and the third-person narration. When writing in the first person, Lovecraft tends to be too melodramatic. Other stories in the 'Sarnath' style would be appreciated.

"It took me quite a long time to finish BFT, because of Whitehead's *The Great Circle.* I started it a half-dozen times. It was not a dull story, but I just could not seem to get started with it. Mainly, because I had recently finished Whitehead's *The Trap,* and I guess I was just expecting the worst. It was quite a bit dated, but I don't recall ever reading anything like it. Naturally, I was a bit bugged when Whitehead has Canevin say on page 27, 'Wilkes, poor fellow, crashed over the Andes less than three months ago.' This statement does not exactly help build up suspense. In fact, the story would have been greatly improved with the deletion of this giveaway.

"The remaining three stories were just about a toss-up. All three were fair. Poe's *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* was very similar in tone to his *Thou Art the Man,* which is an excellent, if little known, detective story, which might fit into *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES.* 'Never Bet' is well balanced, in that Poe never lets his satire against his literary enemies destroy the theme of his story, and the scene on the bridge is eerie and macabre.

"*A Taste of Rain and Darkness* was well-written, but the theme was quite limited and predictable. It was a mood piece without development–similar to the nightmare of the Flying Dutchman.

"Despite its age, *The 'V' Force* held up very well, and did not seem as dated as Whitehead's story; although I like Bertin's story, the tale did not seem compelling. The theme had promise, but it did not seem to be developed right.

"Anyway, I look forward to the second issue of *BIZARRE FANTASTY TALES,* and wish you good luck.

"I have finally dug into my pocket and bought Cockroft's *Index to the Weird Fiction Magazines.* It is a very valuable reference work when used in conjunction with your publications."

FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION is among the dear departed.

I entirely agree on the worth of *Thou Art the Man,* but cannot help feel this to be as generally familiar to most of our readers as the three Dupin stories. As with those paradigmatic mystery tales, Poe introduces elements in this one which would be used again and again and

again by mystery and detective authors to come, and I should have said something about this tale in my editorial on Poe, even though the main subject was Dupin.

The Cockroft *Index* is indeed a fine one, and my task would have been many times more difficult without it.

Frank Ross writes from New City, New York: "Are you sure that you didn't make a mistake and credit *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* to Edgar Allan Poe instead of Mark Twain? No—I'm only kidding; of course it's by Poe, but my Lord, how close he comes to Mark Twain in this one. I'd never seen it before and it was one of the most pleasant shocks and surprises I've had in a long time. Good as the other stories are, this is my favorite in your first issue. And Eddy C. Bertin's tale comes second with me, even though it is little more than a mood piece—I have the feeling that this is all that it was supposed to be. What you call the 'alert' reader foresaw the ending far in advance, and I think the author intended him to—rather than dutifully throwing out a clue which he hoped that too many readers would not pick up at once. I feel that this was planned as a story of confirmation, not revelation, and it certainly has power.

"I hate to put any of the other three stories in last place, but the Whitehead tale really should rank above Lovecraft and Smale; and the Smale story was really fresh and different to me—so I think I'll vote third place for *The Great Circle* and a fourth place tie for the other two.

"The title *Murgunstrumm* sounds interesting, and Hugh B. Cave can be very effective, judged by some of the other stories of his you have run—he can also be pretty routine. Well, since you picked it for a lead novella (I assume) perhaps this will be one of his stronger ones, worked out at length. I hope the horror isn't just a *Specialty of the House* sort of thing, though. I can't help trying to guess in advance and I'd be sore at myself if I found I'd figured it out before reading a line of it."

You're the second person who compared Poe to Mark Twain in relation to *Never Bet the Devil Your Head*, and I'm mortified that I did not see this absurdly obvious (now that it's been pointed out to me) point before.

Be of good cheer—you haven't spoiled *Murgunstrumm* for yourself in advance!

Due to an "unpredictable concatenation of fortuities", it was impossible to bring you the second issue of *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* as we had originally planned and prepared the magazine. The original contents of that issue, however, will appear in due course—except for material which has become too dated meanwhile, such as the editorial.

Does any veteran fan recognize the phrase in quotation marks in the paragraph above? There's a free 6-issue subscription (or extension of an existing subscription if you have one at the time) to *BIZARRE FANTASY TALES* awaiting the first reader who can tell me in what magazine it appeared, who used it, and what the occasion was.

Murgunstrumm, by Hugh B. Cave turned out to be somewhat longer than I had expected, and in the original setting for our second issue, I had found it necessary to abridge the opening chapters slightly. I am rather glad of the oppportunity to re-think this problem, as while personally I feel that the story does not really need the matter I'd cut out, still I know that many of you want to see these tales exactly as they were in the old magazines (allowing for correction of typographical errors or needless inconsistencies). I shall

(Turn to Page 128)

The Editor's Page

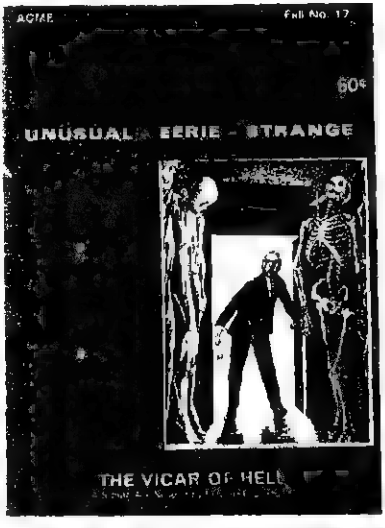
(continued from page 9)

title: *Zothique*, edited and with an introduction by Lin Carter. (See the *Inquisitions* section for a breakdown of contents.)

These are all examples of the mature Smith, and were published originally in *WEIRD TALES* between the issues of September 1932 (*The Empire of the Necromancers*) and May 1953 (*Morthylla*), except for *The Voyage of King Euvoran*, which appeared in a folio-size pamphlet entitled *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (it was abridged when run in *WEIRD TALES*, September 1947, under the title of *Quest of the Gazolba*), and the poem, *Zothique*, heretofore available only in the Arkham House collection, *The Dark Chateau and Other Poems.*

I remember hearing from some science fiction fan in the late thirties that Clark Ashton Smith wasn't really as erudite as he appeared to be; he drafted his stories in plain English and then looked up fancy words in an unabridged dictionary to give them color. I wonder how many (if any) readers were turned off—or rather, turned themselves off—Clark Ashton Smith at this canard. For canard it is, even it were entirely true. It doesn't matter a particle whether he obtained his vocabulary from a wide reading of literature, or from an unabridged dictionary, or from both—using the u.a.d. for handy reference. It's the results that count, and the proper question is: Do these stories give the feeling that the author is the master, rather than the servant, of the language he uses? My answer today is the same as it would have been back in the thirties, except that wider experience in reading enables me to say with greater confidence that the author is in charge here. So much for Smith's sources.

What Lin Carter has done is, through careful study of such internal evidence to be found in the stories, to arrange the Zothique series in chronological order, rather than the order in which they were published. As he acknowledges, readers may disagree here and there. I have a vivid recollection of these tales, so I have not re-read them yet again, in this order (not needing to in order to recommend them, as I did re-read them in their published order no more than a decade ago) and cannot comment upon the



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Carter chronology. Whether it works perfectly from beginning to end makes no difference; in places it will work, for, as he says in his introduction, there are some very clear indications, certainly—such as that *The Last Hieroglyph* is later than *The Dark Eidolon;* Carter tells something about the basis for his decisions in a three-page epilogue, *"The Sequence of the Zothique Tales."* I would have liked to have seen more on this subject.

Of course, the true lover of CAS will want both the new Arkham House book and this collection (interestingly enough, all the Zothique tales appeared in the earlier Arkham House volumes, some of them now out of print), but the hardcover book should then be read before the softcover. There's not much chance for enjoying what really is enjoyable in *Other Dimensions* if you've just read *Zothique*—and you don't want to be unsportmanslike, do you?

It's no pleasure to have to close with a complaint, but there is a flaw in this otherwise handsome softcover collection: both the left hand and the right hand running heads carry the title of the collection itself, *Zothique.* Now that is perfectly right for the left hand running heads, but the right hand heads should, for the readers' convenience, carry the title of the particular story. You might not think it overly important, and I would not myself, offhand, if I had not found before, in reading a collection of stories that, for one reason or another, I had to flip back to the contents page for information which should have been constantly present for me. And certainly there was no need to deprive the reader of convenient information in the conventional manner. RAWL

THE PENTACLE

(Continued from Page 125)

therefore plan to bring the story to you uncut, but it is just possible that we might have to run it as a two-part serial in *MAGAZINE OF HORROR* instead of running it here.

We cannot take the chance of presenting an all-or-none package, as earlier publishers could do with fantasy magazines and enjoy large sales. We must have several titles on the cover to attract potential new readers. Personally I consider *Murgunstrumm* a fine, bizarre-sounding title—but I'd better not stake everything upon my own personal reactions. So if we cannot get several other stories into the same issue as the complete novel, we'll just have to make it a serial, as I noted above. RAWL

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